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# Transforming Motherhood: Single Parents' Liberation In The 1970s

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**TRANSFORMING MOTHERHOOD: SINGLE PARENTS' LIBERATION IN THE 1970s**

by

**ELIZABETH RYAN**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University

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MAJOR: HISTORY

Approved By:

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Advisor

Date

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, who always held me to high expectations.  
And to my daughters, for whom I continuously strive to meet those expectations.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am a very lucky person. I have the most supportive family and friends who have made it possible for me to successfully complete my graduate program and write this dissertation. My daughters, Molly and Abby, were born during my time in graduate school; they've always known me as a student. Their dad, Barry, never wavered in his support and encouragement. I owe them more than I can repay. My parents, Robin and Mladen Grujovski, helped so much and so often, it's impossible to recount their contributions here.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: SINGLE PARENTS IN THE 1970S

In early 1972, new friends and single mothers Karol Hope and Lisa Connolly met for dinner. During the course of the evening, they “suddenly realized” that many of the stories about which they chatted “bore on topics peculiarly relevant to single mothers; how to make ends meet, how to find time for themselves, how to relate to their kids, and, of course, how to beat the deadening isolation.”<sup>1</sup> Their revelation convinced them to reach out to other single mothers in the hopes of creating a community that could benefit from shared experiences. Joined by Ann DeWolf and Nancy Young, two other single mothers, the women organized MOMMA, the Organization for Single Mothers, in Los Angeles, California, that March. Seventy-five single mothers attended the first MOMMA meeting at the Modern Playschool in Culver City.<sup>2</sup>

The single mothers of MOMMMA reacted to their anxieties about solo parenting in a way that was deeply rooted in their historical time and place. The language of their publications and meetings was steeped in feminist rhetoric, and their proactive solution of creating a community of like-minded women followed models of the social movements of the previous decade. By the early 1970s, the American women’s liberation movement caused significant social and legal changes throughout the nation. Women began to have access to easier “no fault” divorces to escape unhappy or violent marriages. Banks began to offer personal bank accounts and lines of credit, which women had not been eligible for in previous decades. More women earned degrees in higher education as universities

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Robertson. “MOMMA, The Organization for Single Women,” *momma: the newspaper/magazine for single mothers*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1972).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

offered access to programs and the government and private banks made available education loans. Women pressed for equal opportunity in the workforce, eliminating sex-segregated want ads and forcing employers to promote women to traditionally male (and higher-paying) jobs. They argued for maternity rights and benefits, often unsuccessfully, demanding better and cheaper child care facilities, paid maternity leave, job security and family-friendly, flexible workplaces. In 1973, the *Roe vs. Wade* Supreme Court decision legalized abortion and widened the possible lifestyle choices for women across class and race lines. Women's liberation groups debated women's social roles, the relationship between men and women, and even questioned the emphasis on women's role as mothers. Many American women encouraged abandoning the status quo governing women's social and legal positions in order to carve out new and potentially more progressive alternatives.

*Transforming Motherhood* examines the changes in American motherhood in the 1970s and 1980s by focusing on the experiences of single mothers. The dissertation locates the position of single mothers in the feminist movement and examines how the women's liberation movement of the 1970's affected single mothers. The study follows a thematic analysis of conditions connected to single motherhood. As a social and cultural study of single mothers in the seventies and eighties, the project examines the political, social, emotional and material conditions of single mothers to better understand the larger issues associated with single motherhood in Western society.

*Transforming Motherhood* repositions the single mother from that of a peripheral outsider to a figure of central importance in understanding modern American motherhood. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, "The number of single parents went from 3.8 million



in 1970 to 6.9 million in 1980, increasing at an average rate of 6.0 percent per year.” About 90% of those single parents were women.<sup>3</sup> Studies have shown that, “among children born in the late 1970s, 42 percent of whites and 86 percent of Blacks will spend some time in a single-parent family,” a fact owing most often to the divorce rate.<sup>4</sup> In face, “Single parent households increased by a whopping 79 percent during the 1970s.”<sup>5</sup> This trend has continued into the twenty-first century. In the United States in 2009, “9.9 million single mothers and 1.7 million single fathers lived with their kids.”<sup>6</sup> Solo parenting has also become prevalent in most other Western, industrialized nations: for instance, “since the late 1970s, the proportion of single-parent families has increased by more than 50 per cent” in France.<sup>7</sup> In Britain, “The proportion of families headed by a single parent has topped 25 per cent for the first time, reflecting a huge growth in the number of never-married mothers and a significant rise in the divorce rate over the past 30 years.”<sup>8</sup> Single mothers have accounted for a significant proportion of Western mothers since the 1970s and an examination of their experiences is essential in understanding the nature of modern motherhood in both the United States and other industrialized nations.

The majority of women living as single mothers in the seventies and eighties were divorced. The ranks of single mothers, however, also included widows, unwed teenage mothers, abandoned wives, women whose husbands were imprisoned and a growing

<sup>3</sup> Steve W. Rawlings, “Households and Families” *U.S. Census Bureau* (<http://www.census.gov/population/www/pop-profile/hhfam.html>); accessed 3/20/2011.

<sup>4</sup> Iris Marion Young, “Mothers, Citizenship, and Independence: A Critique of Pure Family Values,” *Ethics* 105, no. 3 (April 1995): 537.

<sup>5</sup> Ann Crittendon, *The Price of Motherhood*, 56.

<sup>6</sup> Single Women, “Single? You’re Not Alone,” CNN Living, [http://articles.cnn.com/2010-08-19/living/single.in.america\\_1\\_single-fathers-single-mothers-single-parents?\\_s=PM:LIVING](http://articles.cnn.com/2010-08-19/living/single.in.america_1_single-fathers-single-mothers-single-parents?_s=PM:LIVING) (August 19, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Simon Duncan and Rosalind Edwards, *Single Mothers in an International Context: Mothers or Workers?* (London: University College of London, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> *The Times*, London, March 2, 2000.

number of women who chose single motherhood. Single mothers have had a long history of being the heads of households and primary care givers, juggling work inside and outside the home. While this image of the Supermom became popular in the late 1970s, the mother depicted was usually married. Single mothers in the 1970s faced the challenges of parenting at a time when there was an increased opportunity to combine parenting with work outside the home. Both married and unmarried mothers with small children began to enter the workforce at a higher rate and social expectations of combining the two jobs came to reflect the change. To be sure, society continued to characterize most single mothers as deviant and problematic. However, women's increasing educational and workforce opportunities, in addition to increased social provision, allowed many single moms to make it on their own. They were not forced to remarry, as many women in similar situations had done during their mothers' generation. Those who were unmarried and pregnant were not forced to give up their illegitimate children to adoption. Single mothers in the 1970s were the vanguard of these changes. They faced the challenges of day care, wage discrimination, and finding family-friendly jobs long before it became the norm. By the 1990s, these issues would face the majority of mothers in the United States.

Historians Linda Gordon and Rickie Solinger have laid the groundwork for the history of unwed American mothers. Linda Gordon's *Pitied, But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* discussed the creation of the New Deal welfare state as it related to single mothers, explaining the political, racial and social forces that would inevitably leave welfare mothers stigmatized and poverty-stricken. Gordon, however, ended her story before the women's liberation movement of the 1960s changed the story.

Rickie Solinger's *Wake Up Little Susie* also focused on the era preceding this study of single mothers. She examined the ways that race affected the stigmatization of single mothers in the 1950s and 1960s, concluding that black and white single mothers faced different social castigation. Social workers and psychologists labeled unwed black mothers as deviants, while they diagnosed white women as mentally unstable and in need of rehabilitation.

*Transforming Motherhood* continues the story of single mothers' relationship to the state. In a time of economic downturn, states faced the challenges of increasing demand for welfare assistance at the same time as a need to cut budgets. Welfare case workers were overloaded, the bureaucracy became increasingly complicated, and welfare seemed less attractive to some single mothers. The dissertation addresses questions such as: How did single mothers cope with these challenges? Did women turn to other state or private institutions instead of the federal welfare program to help them get by? What was the relationship between the women of MOMMA and the state? Did class and race affect the ways in which women incorporated state aid?

While the organizers of MOMMA were overwhelmingly white, the organization attracted members from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. In the history of American single mothers, race seemed to be a defining feature. A large body of literature exists discussing the decade's welfare rights movements and the plight of the welfare mother since World War II; however, much of the analysis has focused on African American women.<sup>9</sup> For instance, Solinger's history *Wake Up Little Susie* explained how American

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<sup>9</sup> See Lisa Levenstein's *A Movement Without Marches: African American Women and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia*, Annelise Orleck's *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty*, and Felicia Ann Kornbluh's *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America*.

views on black and white unwed mothers shifted in the 1950s and '60s. Solinger argued that critics began associating black women with hyper-sexuality and deviance while health professionals, among others, classified unwed white (middle class) mothers as psychologically impaired, but able to be rehabilitated. Like Linda Gordon, Solinger focused on the era immediately preceding that of this proposal, setting up conditions for second wave feminists.

The dissertation also examines how single mothers fit into the feminist movement of the 1970s, how mainstream women's liberation groups like NOW reacted to the needs of single mothers, and how that movement may have shaped the organization of MOMMA. In many ways, the story of MOMMA reflects a typical pattern within the feminist movement of the 1960s and '70s. Historians such as Ruth Rosen, Sara Evans, and Susan Brownmiller have given numerous examples of the rise and fall of early feminist groups. Typically, women joined together to relate to one another on a personal level. They shared life stories, understood that many of their personal experiences were related to larger social and institutional issues; and, click!, they moved into action to help create change. The women of MOMMA did this, too. They started a food co-op, shared housing, and established child care groups. They gathered a file of resources to share with the community on issues like welfare rights, babysitters and lawyers - what they called "survival information."<sup>10</sup> MOMMA also had growing pains. The organization even suffered the same problems as typical women's liberation groups. Members had personality clashes. They resented the authority of the leadership; the process of the

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<sup>10</sup> Lin Hartwell in Karol Young and Nancy Hope, eds. *Momma: The Sourcebook for Single Mothers* (NY: American Library, 1976), 380-1.

group ranged from radical therapy to *Roberts' Rules*, and they tried organizing as a collective with equality for all.

MOMMA was not, however, a mainstream feminist group. The feminist movement generally ignored single mothers, unaware that such women existed, needed, or wanted help. In 1971, a *Los Angeles Times* article reported that “Betty Freidan was asked whether the women’s movement would like to help single mothers. Ms. Freidan replied with a question, ‘Are there that many of them?’ She paused. ‘Can they read?’”<sup>11</sup> Unnoticed at the time, the women of MOMMA and single women of the ‘60s in general, remain practically invisible in the historical record. They show up, when mentioned at all, as an aside, an example of “other” areas in which feminists worked. The single mothers of MOMMA existed outside the movement, narrowly confined to what many might consider their own special interests.

Because the literature on the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s largely ignores issues of single mothers, this dissertation investigates the gap among primarily heterosexual mothers. Homosexual mothers are not excluded and their stories are incorporated where relevant, however, there is a growing body of literature on gay parenting in the 1970s and 1980s dealing more specifically with the distinct challenges faced by the LGBT community.<sup>12</sup> Lesbian mothers helped create a foundation of single parent families which challenged the gendered stereotypes of motherhood and fatherhood. They helped single mothers liberate themselves from the constrictions of the traditional nuclear family with its built-in heteronormativity.

<sup>11</sup> Lanie Jones, “New Pride in Being a Single Mother,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 1972.

<sup>12</sup> In *Radical Relations: Lesbian Mothers, Gay Fathers, and Their Children in the United States since World War II*, Daniel Winunwe presents the first history of gay families.

Liberation, as a theme, permeates the history of single mothers. In early feminist literature, the institution of motherhood itself was questioned. Writers like Beauvoir and Firestone connected motherhood with patriarchal oppression; the reproductive functions of the female body became the chains that bound women to the “underclass.” Entangled in struggles for reproductive rights and equality, the conversation about motherhood focused largely on a woman’s right to choose whether or not to bear children. Fractured along lines of class and race, middle-class white women seemed to dominate the argument. African American and Chicana women organized with the aim to elevate and increase the respectability of motherhood. In *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave*, Benita Roth explains how the history of racism in the U.S. played an important part in creating this divide. Instead of arguing about a woman’s right NOT to bear a child, these minority women focused on how to combine motherhood with feminism and equality. They wanted to change the assumption that single motherhood was a pathology and/or a punishment. Single mothers of all ethnicities could relate to this conversation.

MOMMA’s publications indicates that the rhetoric of the paper drew largely from the mainstream feminist movement and other freedom movements on the Left. Even though its members faced daily struggles not unlike those of the poor and working classes, there seemed to be a serious effort to maintain middle-class values. Many of the articles lamented the fall from middle-class life due to divorce; many of the women about which the magazine reported had college educations and had been flung into poverty as they became single parents. They faced the choice of entering the welfare system or joining (or increasing their participation in) the labor force. Unlike their African-

American counterparts involved later in the Welfare Rights Movement, the white, middle-class single mothers examined in this dissertation did not try and change the dominant values of liberty and equality. Instead, they wanted a chance to apply the rugged individualism espoused by both patriarchy and the feminist movement. They needed jobs that paid fairly, decent and affordable child care, and places to live that did not discriminate against single mothers. They desired the chance to take care of themselves and their children – to be full citizens.

While Betty Friedan had called for women to increase their participation in wage work outside the home, she had failed to inspire a mainstream national conversation about how women, like single mothers, could successfully answer that call without adequate child care, flexible work schedules, better pay, and safer working conditions. As Dorothy Sue Cobble shows in *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in America* how working and union women tried to bring about structural change in the labor force system to address women's issues. As the primary breadwinners for their families, single mothers were also advocated these issues as particular to their "labor feminism". Whether or not groups like MOMMA associated themselves with unions and the "working class", their publications reflected middle-class, white values that were at odds with these "labor movements" more militant arms.

MOMMA, the organization for single mothers, stated in their constitution that, despite the name of their group, single fathers were encouraged to join. While single-father-headed families were rare in the '70s and '80s, it is important in a study of gender, motherhood, and feminism to include the male perspective. These decades saw a redefinition of fatherhood that included a more hands-on approach for men. Men were

encouraged to provide more nurturing and physical childcare, and, essentially, men were encouraged to mother. *Transforming Motherhood* compares the experiences of single fathers and single mothers. Did they have the same economic problems? Did they face discrimination due to their circumstances? Did they feel stigmatized or did society treat them differently? Were courts more supportive and kind because of their seemingly unique position? The dissertation concludes that, while there were significant differences between single fathers and mothers, the experiences of both sexes tended to affect society similarly. Both single fatherhood and single motherhood transformed twenty-first century families and forced a discussion about the kinds of social services, employment practices, and educational programs Western nations needed to implement to best serve all families.

While *Transforming Motherhood* focuses on the lives of single mothers in the last quarter of the twentieth century, it is really the beginning of the history of parenthood of the twenty-first century. The women who pioneered the single-headed-family phenomenon of the seventies and eighties brought to light the major flaws in the Western capitalist system which assumes gender norms, demands workers be individuals with no familial responsibilities, and places the burden and expense of raising children solely on families. Because most married families require two working parents in the twenty-first century, both fathers and mothers experience the difficulties in juggling professional and personal responsibilities. As a greater level of equality ensues between the sexes in the arena of housework and childcare, both men and women have begun to understand the need for better day care, more flexible work schedules, paid family leave, and more affordable housing. Additionally, the single mothers of the 1970s helped to redefine what



constituted a family, paving the way for the multitude of family units in existence today, with step-families, adopted families, homosexual parents, single-parents, and married parents all demanding to be acknowledged as the norm. And yet, with all of the positive gains made by the pioneers of the single parents' liberation movement, society still remains skeptical of the ability of single parents to parent properly. There continue to be naysayers and critics. Newspapers, blogs, websites, and magazine articles regularly run the headline: "Single Moms: Bad for Society." Histories such as *Transforming Motherhood* exist to remind those interested in demonizing them that single mothers have worked incredibly hard to achieve success and have faced critics for decades without backing down.

### **Chapter Descriptions**

Chapter 1 – Introduction.

Chapter 2 – Single Parents' Liberation: Single Parents' Organizations in the U.S.A. and U.K. Single Parents' Liberation argues that the single parents who organized for change during the seventies and eighties were part of the larger movement toward social and economic equality started by the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s. Like other contemporary movements such as Women's Liberation, the Gay Liberation Movement, the Native American Movement, and the Welfare Rights Movement, Single Parents organized on multiple levels to bring about social and political changes. The chapter discusses the different ways single parents came together to assist one another through the difficulties of solo parenting. From Parents Without Partners in the U.S. to Gingerbread in the U.K., organizations appeared throughout these decades to meet the various needs of single parent families. Some groups met personal needs, others

provided practical advice, and some attempted to influence legislation. The multi-pronged effort at solving the complicated problems affecting single parent families helped in the process of normalization.

Chapter 3 – Feminist Motherhood: Single Mothers and the Women’s Liberation Movement. This chapter focuses on the ways in which women’s liberation affected single motherhood. It also examines how inter-generational messages spread between baby boomers and their mothers helped sow the seeds for single motherhood in the 1970s. Historians have discussed the ways in which Baby Boomers rejected the domesticity of their mothers. In this analysis, the Baby Boomers have the power and are choosing to reject the lifestyle choices of their mothers. *Transforming Motherhood* finds that Baby Boomers’ mothers sometimes played an active role in reshaping the next generation of young women by encouraging them to make different choices. In fact, because of the messages sent by their mothers, the younger generation viewed single motherhood as a viable alternative to unhappy marriages.

Chapter 4 – Making Ends Meet: Supporting the Single Mother Family. This chapter looks at the possible solutions available to single mothers to help them support their families in a world where marriage was the social and political norm. Single mothers challenged ideas about citizenship and denied the breadwinner/homemaker dichotomy. Single mothers worked together in communal ways, helping one another economically, emotionally, and politically. The chapter discusses challenges because of child care, housing, and job opportunity which shaped the options for single mothers.

Chapter 5 – Feminist Fatherhood: Men Can Mother. The women of MOMMA welcomed single fathers into their organization. As mentioned above, they made clear it would not

change the name of their group, but they recognized that solo parenting, by either fathers or mothers, could pose challenges for families. During the seventies, feminists called for more hands-on parenting by fathers and tried to redefine the norms of fatherhood from the stereotypically fifties' dad who's primary responsibility was being the breadwinner. While single fathers represented a small minority of solo parents (one estimate in the early seventies was about one percent), details of their experiences provides evidence about the ways that gender and social expectations affected single parents. In *Confessions of a Single Father*, one seventies' single dad documented a decade of raising his son and daughter and how it changed their lives and relationships with one another. Additionally, groups like the National Council on Family Relations studied the emerging trend of single fatherhood that started to grow in the seventies and reported on the status of these fathers as well as suggestions for programs to assist them. A review of single fathers on television and in film shows that single dads (especially widowers) had been stock characters, but with movies like *Kramer vs. Kramer*, the new fatherhood showed a sharp difference from single motherhood. Single fathers evoked a sympathy and nobility that society refused to grant to single mothers.

Chapter 6 – Life as a Single Mother: Sex, Choice, and Children. While there are a number of histories *about* single mothers, many do not focus on or include voices of the mothers themselves. However, single mothers in the '70s and '80s left a rich record of their experiences. Memoirs, interviews, and works of fiction exist chronicling the tragedies and triumphs of these unwed mothers. In addition, journalists and sociologists studied this subgroup with great interest. There seemed to be an awareness among the mothers and professionals alike that something new was happening in American motherhood and they

desired to capture its meaning. This chapter focuses on the experiences of single mothers as women, including a look at changes in dating and sexuality.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

## CHAPTER 2 SINGLE PARENTS' LIBERATION: SINGLE PARENTS' ORGANIZATIONS IN THE U.S.A. AND U.K.

In February 1974, MOMMA: the organization for single mothers was highlighted by two major women's magazines. First, *Mademoiselle* magazine honored eleven winners nationally at their annual awards ceremony in New York City. Among the honorees were Karol Hope and Lisa Connolly, two of the original founders of MOMMA: the organization for single mothers. They were awarded for their outstanding achievement in assisting single mothers and for the successful publication of *MOMMA: a newspaper/magazine for single mothers*, launched in December 1972.<sup>13</sup> In an article celebrating "12 Women Who DID Something," the founders emphasized the need for single mothers to work together and reported, "...we aren't going to achieve any change in our environment without all of our energies. We have to do it together."<sup>14</sup> Then, *Ms.* magazine featured MOMMA in the article, "How to Make Trouble: Mothers Alone Get It Together," which explained that, "The goal of the MOMMA organization is to try to improve the single-mother experience. They hope to do this in two ways: first, by working directly with single mothers, and second, by working in the community at large."<sup>15</sup> MOMMA had achieved national recognition and hundreds of chapters had spread throughout the country from its point of conception in Los Angeles, California. Success seemed assured.

Transnationally, single parent families found varying degrees of support from government agencies and existing organizations. In a cross-cultural comparison, single-parent groups from the U.S. and the U.K. reflected the similarities that Western,

<sup>13</sup> "Founders of Momma Feted by Magazine," *Los Angeles Times* (Feb. 5, 1974).

<sup>14</sup> Linda Dietrich, "Karol Hope and Lisa Connolly," *Mademoiselle* (February 1974).

<sup>15</sup> Vicki Hodgetts, "How to Make Trouble: Mothers Alone Get It Together," *Ms.* (February 1974) 96-98.

industrialized nations experienced, while also having very distinct cultural differences. The organizing tactics of single parents in the U.K. led to a liberation movement and government acknowledgement of the needs of single parent families. In the U.S., however, single parents tended to form local organizations and were largely ignored by contemporary feminist organizations. The comparison also shows how groups from the UK succeeded in creating a Single Parents' Liberation Movement, while U.S. organizations began a process of awareness that spread unevenly throughout the culture.

1974 was a tumultuous year for the organizers of MOMMA. The group faced financial difficulties and personality clashes among board members that threatened to shut them down. Lin Hartwell, President in 1974/1975, remembered how, "MOMMA was growing fast. Too fast. We were all working very hard, many of us twelve- and fourteen-hour days. There was no money. No material reward... People were exhausted. Tempers flared. Personalities conflicted."<sup>16</sup> The group failed to print an issue of their newspaper for six months that year. In June 1974, *Ms.* magazine published an editorial explaining what happened:

...single mothers, the poorest class of citizens in the country (there are at least 7 million women struggling to raise children alone), started a Los Angeles-based organization and a newspaper called MOMMA in order to share information and organize around the problems of survival. West Coast writer Vicki Hodgetts reports on this fact in our February 1974 issue – but in the inevitable three months between manuscript delivery to us and delivery of the printed magazine to you, MOMMA's slender resources run out and the newspaper stops publication. The first *Ms.* readers who turn to this much-needed organization are disappointed: MOMMA is over. But then the subscription orders pour in from all over the country, and so do request for booklets on "How to Start a MOMMA Chapter." The result is renewed publication and at least 100 new chapters of MOMMA. (Now MOMMA is applying for federal funds...)<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Lin Hartwell, "A History of Momma," MOMMA: The Sourcebook (New York: New American Library, Inc., 1976) 383.

<sup>17</sup> *Ms.* (June 1974) 74.

Despite the surge in subscriptions and widespread support for the newspaper, MOMMA published its final edition in 1974. It is unclear how long the group's national board and chapters continued to operate, but by the mid-seventies a variety of agencies, from churches to local governments, had begun organizing to assist single mothers lead more productive, successful, and fulfilling lives.

The women who gathered in 1972 to organize MOMMA felt isolated and invisible. They identified a need for information, camaraderie, and validation of their roles as single mothers. During their first dinner together founders Karol Hope and Lisa Connolly “suddenly realized that their finding-out-about-each-other conversation bore on topics peculiarly relevant to single mothers; how to make ends meet, how to find time for themselves, how to relate to their kids, and, of course, how to beat the deadening isolation that threatened to make their hard-won independence a hollow victory.”<sup>18</sup> In deciding to form their own support group, they signaled the belief that there were no existing groups available to meet their needs. This is telling, as there were a number of groups operating throughout the U.S. which catered to the needs of single parents. For example, in 1969 and 1970, in nearby California cities, two separate institutions advertised the formation of family discussion groups, identifying single parents as potential participants. The Family Service Association of Orange County offered to facilitate, “in small discussion groups, problems ranging from child discipline to household management... in a sort of ‘do-it-yourself kit,’”<sup>19</sup> while the West Park Jewish Community Center organized a “program tailored for the interests of single parents and their children.”<sup>20</sup> But the most widely known

<sup>18</sup> *Momma: the sourcebook for single mothers*, 377.

<sup>19</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 27, 1969.

<sup>20</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 4, 1970.

of the groups was Parents Without Partners, a national organization with branches in almost every state and a long history of organizing single parents. With options such as these available, why did the women who organized MOMMA feel isolated and motivated to start their own grassroots operation? A comparison of MOMMA: The Organization for Single Mothers and Parents Without Partners will help identify some of the cultural shifts in thinking about single motherhood at the beginning of the 1970s and will help place MOMMA into the mainstream feminist movement, as an analysis of its messages and rhetoric will reveal it to be a feminist consciousness-raising organization. In the final analysis, PWP catered to the needs of more conservative single parents who likely wanted to remarry, where MOMMA focused on the independence the women gained in their single motherhood.

The idea for Parents Without Partners (PWP) took root on a beach near New York City in 1956. Jim Egleson, a divorced father without custody, and Jacqueline Bernard, a divorced mother with custody, were visiting the seaside with a married-couple set of friends who had children. “As these four people talked together they were struck by the obvious differences in all their lives,” a history of Parents Without Partners explained. “It was apparent to them that the problems of single parents are often far from similar to those of married parents... The question of getting together with other single mothers and fathers – to compare notes, to see how they handled matters, to find out if something could be learned from them – grew out of this conversation.”<sup>21</sup> Months went by and finally in February 1957, Jim and Jacqui decided to place an advertisement in the classified section of two New York newspapers:

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<sup>21</sup> Jim Egleson and Janet Frank Egleson, *Parents Without Partners: A Guide for Divorced, Widowed, or Separated Parents* (New York: E.P.Dutton and Company, Inc., 1961) 188.



PARENTS WITHOUT PARTNERS: whether you have your children full time or “on visitation” – wouldn’t you like to know others in the same position – to talk over common problems, to develop a fuller life for both yourself and your children, to hold group discussions with psychologists, lawyers, etc.? We’d like to hear from you.<sup>22</sup>

The first group of single parents met at the Village Presbyterian Church on West Thirteenth Street in New York City on March 21, 1957. After a relatively relaxed initial meeting, the group quickly organized itself. Jim was elected President and Jacqui became Vice President. Word spread quickly and PWP grew to such proportions that eventually information was restricted to dues-paying members to keep costs realistic. The group focused on educational and social activities, specifically offering: “discussion groups, program meetings, parent-child activities, socials, and the newsletter.”<sup>23</sup> PWP became a highly successful enterprise. As of July 2012, according to the organization’s website, “Parents Without Partners, Inc. is the largest international, nonprofit membership organization devoted to the welfare and interests of single parents and their children. Single parents may join one of the many chapters around the US and Canada; they may be male or female, custodial or non-custodial, separated, divorced, widowed or never married.”<sup>24</sup>

In the late 1950s, when Jim and Jacqui founded Parents Without Partners, they faced strong social stigma against single parents. Society viewed marriage as the normal state for heterosexual adults and unwed parents seemed deviant. Widows and widowers faced far fewer negative reactions than divorced or never-married parents, and they often elicited sympathy and respect, but most people expected widows and widowers with

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.parentswithoutpartners.org/about-who.html> (viewed July 25, 2012).

young children to remarry as soon as possible. Remaining unmarried for too long became cause for alarm. Unmarried mothers faced far more negative responses than unmarried fathers and in the 1950s and into the 1960s, most professionals including social workers, psychologists, and doctors considered single mothers pathological and requiring treatment.<sup>25</sup> Being an unwed mother or having a child out-of-wedlock was considered even more serious. One study of unwed mothers published in 1966 acknowledged that “the majority of citizens still see it [illegitimacy] as an indication of immorality and a threat to the legitimate family system.”<sup>26</sup> The authors of the study framed illegitimacy as a serious social problem and tried to analyze the mothers in order to find a helpful solution to their condition, i.e. unwed motherhood. The study purported to have as its target audience social workers and others who created policies to aid single mothers, but the general theme of the book underlined the fact that the solution to illegitimacy was to promote marriage. Those mothers who chose to have children out-of-wedlock were considered abnormal. One article stressed that, “Unless we are to assume that illegitimacy may spring from any haphazard combination of motives and circumstances, there must be certain defined emotional patterns that lead to the creation of this problem.”<sup>27</sup> The researchers believed that unwed motherhood stemmed from unhealthy family life as children, overbearing mothers, distant fathers, and personality defects such as selfishness in the mothers themselves. It was frightening to think that illegitimacy could happen to a normal woman.

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<sup>25</sup> This was generally considered true for middle-class white women. See Ricki Solinger’s discussion of race and difference in single motherhood in *Wake Up, Little Susie*

<sup>26</sup> Robert W. Roberts, ed., *The Unwed Mother* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) 3.

<sup>27</sup> Leontine R. Young, “Personality Patters in Unmarried Mothers,” In *The Unwed Mother*, ed. Robert W. Roberts (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 81.

The goals of Parents Without Partners reflected the reality of its potential members: many single parents wanted to get married. While the founders wanted to help improve the lives of single parent families, they treated the condition as temporary. At the time, researchers found that at least forty percent of white unwed mothers eventually married and the same study noted that “white mothers usually married a man other than the father of the first child.”<sup>28</sup> For divorced parents, the rates of remarriage after divorce were even higher. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, about sixty to sixty-four percent of men remarried within five years of their divorce and between fifty-four and sixty percent of women remarried.<sup>29</sup> Since the 1950s, most people have consistently remarried within three to four years of divorcing.<sup>30</sup> Many of the members sought remarriage and PWP provided ample opportunities for single mothers and fathers to socialize. In order to facilitate the mingling of the sexes, the group very consciously sought out fathers. In the summer of 1957, for instance, they “concentrated on developing ideas for ‘balancing’ membership through a program of interest and value to divorced and widowed men.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, by making non-custodial parents eligible for membership, PWP opened the door for divorced fathers to join, as the majority of divorces ended with mothers gaining custody of the children. As co-founder Jacqui expressed, “One of PWP’s most satisfying functions might be to try to re-create, for both parents and children, the sense of ‘family good times’

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<sup>28</sup> Mignon Sauber and Eileen M. Conigan, *The Six-Year Experience of Unwed Mothers as Parents: A Continuing Study of These Mothers and Their Children* (New York: Community Council of Greater New York, 1970) 16.

<sup>29</sup> Rose M. Kreider, US Census Bureau, Poster presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, August 2006. “Percentage of Men and Women Who Remarried Within 5 Years After Divorcing From First Marriage, by Divorce Cohort”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., “Median Duration to Remarriage After Divorcing From First Marriage, by Divorce Cohort, for Men and Women”

<sup>31</sup> Jim Egleson and Jane Frank Egleson, *Parents Without Partners: A Guide for Divorced, Widowed, or Separated Parents* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1961), 190.

that is so often missing in divided or one-parent family relationships.”<sup>32</sup> One researcher commented, “Indeed the opportunity to meet someone whom one might date was implicit in every PWP activity that involved both men and women.”<sup>33</sup> By balancing membership between men and women and providing opportunities to recreate the sense of the nuclear family, Parents Without Partners helped middle-class white parents respectably remarry and create new families that were as ‘normal’ as possible.

So, why didn’t the women who eventually joined MOMMA find their way to Parents Without Partners? Why did they feel invisible? Why did they need to create their own organization? Helen from New Jersey explained her reasons for avoiding PWP events:

I would think you would mingle with other single or divorced people, but it’s not so. It’s very difficult. I don’t know that there is anything, except PWP. There’s a dance once a week at a restaurant for Parents Without Partners. The only person I know is a fifty-three-year-old woman who goes there. They’re mostly older people. She said, “If you want to go, fine. Come along some night. But if you’re looking for anyone younger, you’re going to have a problem.” So I just didn’t even bother, which I guess is bad, too. You’ll never find anybody sitting at home.<sup>34</sup>

Helen appeared to want to date; her comment that “you’ll never find anybody sitting at home” exposes that fact. But she was told by her friend that the members at the dance might be too old for her. A study of PWP published in 1971 confirmed this observation, noting that, “At a typical PWP gathering today one has the impression that most of those present are in their thirties and forties.”<sup>35</sup> After Helen ruled out joining PWP, she gave up. There were no alternatives about which she knew. Helen’s response to PWP fit the

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>33</sup> Robert S. Weiss, “The Contributions of an Organization of Single Parents to the Well-Being of Its Members,” *The Family Coordinator* 22, 3 (July 1973): 324.

<sup>34</sup> Voices: Helen (New Jersey) “Where’s My Everything?” – MOMMA: The Sourcebook for Single Women, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Patricia N. Clayton, “Meeting the Needs of the Single Parent Family,” *The Family Coordinator* 2, 4 (October 1971), 330.

characterization of the group portrayed by sociologist Robert Weiss in 1973. Weiss wrote that, “[N]ot all potentially eligible individuals find the organization attractive, often because they believe the organization is too much a dating market, or because they believe themselves in some way to different from members.”<sup>36</sup> Weiss reported that of the approximately 4.7 million single parents who would be eligible to join PWP, only about 70,000 became members. He questioned, “What part of this enormous population of single parents not in PWP experiences the same difficulties and deficits as those displayed by members of PWP? And where do they turn for help? We have no information regarding these issues.”<sup>37</sup>

Like sociologists of the time, the organizers of MOMMA lacked basic demographic information about the single mothers they wished to help. They had no idea how many single mothers there were in Los Angeles and faced a complicated challenge in trying to organize this particular group of women. As single mothers themselves, they understood that the “multi-responsibilities of [their] situation cut [them] off from society. As head of household, breadwinner, decision-maker, raising her children alone, the single mother has little time or energy for ‘socializing.’”<sup>38</sup> Appealing to divorced, separated, widowed and unmarried women raising children alone, organizers Karol Hope and Lisa Connolly sent out news releases indicating that “the main purpose of the group will be to give single mothers the feeling they are not alone in dealing with their very specific and often overwhelming problems.”<sup>39</sup> Joined by two other single mothers, Ann DeWolf and Nancy

<sup>36</sup> Robert Weiss, “The Contributions of an Organization of Single Parents to the Well-Being of its Members,” *The Family Coordinator* 22, 3 (July 1973), 321.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>38</sup> Lin Hartwell in *Momma: The Sourcebook for Single Mothers*, 378.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

Young, the women organized MOMMA in order to address “topics peculiarly relevant to single mothers; how to make ends meet, how to find time for themselves, how to relate to their kids, and, of course, how to beat the deadening isolation.”<sup>40</sup> Gathering at the Modern Playschool in Culver City, seventy-five single mothers attended the first MOMMA meeting.<sup>41</sup> The group started a newspaper/magazine in late 1972; and in 1973 MOMMA chapters grew rapidly around the country.

Families turned to organizations, media sources, and local agencies for guidance and help in navigating these complicated waters, but single mothers had no place to turn in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s that would provide help without judgment. MOMMA: the organization for single mothers formed precisely for that reason. Predating *Working Mothers Magazine*, test-launched in 1979, and *Parenting* magazine in 1987, MOMMA offered practical advice to mothers on topics as diverse as household plumbing, applying for credit, and raising independent children. MOMMA encouraged single mothers to make changes to their individual families in order to create a better life for the present, as opposed to waiting for changes to happen in the larger world. MOMMA engaged in grassroots organizing with an emphasis on local activities because single mothers faced a number of challenges. As early as 1969, one journalist reported on the hazards of being a single mother: “Child care services are extremely limited (and often considered far from desirable). Single men try to take advantage of them, adopting the attitude that they are doing them a favor. Married women view them as a threat. Landlords consider them poor financial risk. And employers suspect they will be unreliable, putting their children

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<sup>40</sup> Barbara Robertson. “MOMMA, The Organization for Single Women,” *Momma: The Newspaper/Magazine for Single Mothers*, 1, no. 1 (1972).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

first.”<sup>42</sup> The mothers of MOMMA had been experiencing these problems firsthand and organized to help each other overcome them. In an article describing the history of the group’s formation, the 1974/75 President explained:

There are millions of women in this country who have found themselves filling the role of single mother, and it’s a role which society does not care to recognize as part of its picture of itself. The woman trying to bring up her children alone is subject to intolerance, or at best apathy, from a social structure which has failed to recognize her very problematic lifestyle. There is little if any specialized communication from her and her family, her friends, or her community. She is isolated and denied the emotional support and sense of a community that group identification can offer. Economically and psychologically, society charges her to adopt the roles of two parents, but the single mother is socially, economically, and historically unique and alone.<sup>43</sup>

Like other marginalized groups and minorities, single mothers felt cast out of society, judged poorly, and disregarded. The women of MOMMA recognized that there were structural, political, and emotional roadblocks to fully incorporating single mothers into mainstream citizenship and they organized to help liberate single mothers from injustice.

At a time of ongoing struggles for liberation by minorities groups including African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, and Native Americans, it is not altogether surprising that single mothers would view themselves as a group needing to become organized and politically active. They had numerous examples of progress and evidence of real change brought about by the organizing of minority groups, and in 1970 the climate was still optimistic. “Why organize?” MOMMA asked and answered. “Because we must find new ways of handling our situation and we must insist on our right to be a part of the general society. And the only way we can exert continuing pressure on the status quo and instigate change that will benefit the single mother and her children is by presenting

<sup>42</sup> Nan Ickeringill, “After the Widow’s Tears Have Dried,” *New York Times* (5 May 1969).

<sup>43</sup> Lin Hartwell, “A History of MOMMA,” *MOMMA: The Sourcebook*, 382.

ourselves to society as a unified body.”<sup>44</sup> With these lofty goals and using the methods of other marginalized groups, the single mothers of MOMMA began what can be distinguished as the preliminary stages of a Single Parents’ Liberation Movement.

The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed an increase in the number of social movements aimed at creating equality amongst all citizens regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. As the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s had shown, agitating for equality and social justice required organization at both the grass-roots and national levels, media attention, and clearly articulated goals. But methods used by one group to organize for change would not necessarily work for another and constituencies often faced challenges building a social movement. In fact, social movements of these decades experimented with new and untested forms of organizing, so much so that sociologists have labeled many of them as “New Social Movements” (NSM) and have identified three key components separating them from social movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Bert Klandermans argues that one can understand the NSMs by looking at *constituencies, values, and forms of action*:

1. Constituencies – *constituencies were new* in that rather than the proletariat, participants in movements had shifted to groups that had been newly marginalized by the contemporary phases of capitalist development, and those who had begun to experience shifts in values and needs as a result of the general changes brought about by industrialization and modernity. According to some authors... this meant that NSMs were largely comprised of middle-class constituents whose basic needs were already met.
2. Values – the NSMs were understood as a challenge to the enlightenment *values* underpinning modernity, the key institutions of political representation, and economic development based on technological progress. Combined, these forces were perceived to be undermining quality of life...
3. Forms of action – *new forms of autonomous action originating outside established groups within civil society and frequently involving coalitions*

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



*between emergent and established groups* became increasingly common. These movements were often anti-hierarchical, attempting to embody alternative values and principles within their organizational practices. The NSMs were often antagonistic towards institutional politics and the State, rather than seeking inclusion.<sup>45</sup>

MOMMA: the organization for single mothers fits many of the descriptions outlined above. Most of the women who joined MOMMA were middle-class, despite the economic struggles they faced due to their status as single mothers. Most of them had been raised in relative prosperity and, of those who had been married, many had lived middle-class lifestyles pre-divorce. Many of the women were angry at the injustice of having to sacrifice their middle-class lifestyle in order to be single mothers. The values of modern capitalism created a gendered workforce where female wages were kept low, forcing single mothers who worked into poverty or onto welfare rolls. MOMMA members wanted to challenge legislators and job-creators for more opportunities for women to earn family wages. MOMMA members also felt sidelined by established groups who did not understand their needs. They espoused alternative values within their organization and sought to change cultural values towards established institutions, while at the same time seeking inclusion as another avenue of enacting change.

“Successful social movements frequently go through a three-stage developmental process,” Wade Horn explains in his examination of the emerging Fatherhood Movement. “The first stage is the setting of an agenda, during which the problem is defined and given urgency.”<sup>46</sup> MOMMA met these criteria, identifying at their first meeting the need of single

<sup>45</sup> Graeme Chesters and Ian Welsh, *Social Movements: The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 12-13.

<sup>46</sup> Wade F. Horn, “The Emerging Fatherhood Movement: Making Room for Daddy,” in *Taking Parenting Public: The Case for a New Social Movement*, ed. Sylvia Ann Hewlett et al. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 238.

mothers to organize for personal support and assistance. They published their magazine/newspaper in order to try and reach the estimated seven million single mothers in the U.S. whom they understood, from first-hand experience, were often isolated from other single mothers. The group wanted to “share job and housing information, child support problems, educational problems and opportunities, child care information” with other single mothers and within a year they had 3,000 nationwide subscribers.<sup>47</sup> Sharing information and pooling resources helped to affect the emotional, economic, and material condition of many single parent families.

The establishment of MOMMA chapters nationwide and the continuation of their publication serve as evidence that MOMMA succeeded in completing the first stage of social movement building. However, MOMMA seemed either unable or unwilling to enter into what Horn identified as the second stage of social movement development: “the recruitment of members from outside the initial group of originators.”<sup>48</sup> Outside organizations, especially feminist publications and leaders, began to take notice of the work MOMMA had achieved in their first year. The articles in *Mademoiselle* and *Ms.* magazines attested to this. And yet, MOMMA continued to focus its energies on helping single mothers (and fathers – dads with custody were allowed to join) have better lives in the present. While the articles in their publication discussed topics requiring national and state legislative changes, such as child care supplements, welfare reforms, and problems with divorce judgments, there is no evidence that MOMMA moved into political action or organized demonstrations to lobby government change on their own behalf. In addition, the unique position of single mothers may have contributed to MOMMA’s isolation; single

<sup>47</sup> Linda Dietrich, “Karol Hope and Lisa Connolly,” *Mademoiselle* (February 1974).

<sup>48</sup> Horn, “Emerging Fatherhood,” 239.

mothers faced very specific problems and may have appeared to outsiders as a special interest group with no connection to wider social concerns. Whatever the reason, MOMMA failed to proceed into the third stage which is “the development of organizational structures capable of sustaining the movement.”<sup>49</sup>

The tone and rhetoric of MOMMA’s publications showed that the women’s liberation movement influenced many of the members and they sought to help single mothers by also fighting gender inequality. At the first planning council meeting in May 1972, the group made some policy decisions which reflected their feminist philosophies. For example they agreed that, “Representation and help will be received from all interested parties, but we will seek females whenever possible (lawyers, doctors, etc.).”<sup>50</sup> While they did not want to turn away help from those willing to give it, many of the single mothers of MOMMA saw male professionals as part of the larger problem and sought to change the usual way they did business. In an article on No Fault Divorce, MOMMA contributing writer Carol Powers reflected on her own treatment during her own divorce. She remembered that a male lawyer’s “habitual term of reference to me had been ‘dear,’ and that his attitude had been punitive and patronizing, if that is humanly possible, and he was going to represent my interests. It didn’t add up.” Powers found a female lawyer and professor at UCLA who agreed that male lawyers often contributed to the problem of inequity in divorce. She reported that the female lawyer/professor, “believes my experience with lawyers is typical, that the new law, for many women, is a ‘disaster’ and that the inequities start with the client (usually female)/lawyer (usually male) relationship. ‘I think what happens is an unconscious process whereby the male attorney representing

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>50</sup> Hartwell, *A History of Momma*, 378.

the woman identifies with the man.”<sup>51</sup> In identifying the need for female professionals and actively seeking them out, MOMMA helped themselves and women in general. Female professionals would provide better service to single mothers, MOMMA argued, because they understood the female point of view and would challenge the status quo on their behalf. In addition, by encouraging single mothers to patronize female professionals, they created a demand which would then translate into more opportunities for women in the professions. In the early 1970s it was still difficult to find women doctors, lawyers, bankers, and CEOs, but their numbers were on the rise.

The very early MOMMA meetings focused on self-awareness, identifying members of the group, and beginning the process of forming cohesion necessary in organization-building. MOMMA founders utilized the “rap group” technique formulated and popularized by women’s liberation. The report of the July 11, 1972 meeting indicated that attendees “broke up into three smaller groups to rap. One group talked about trauma involved in separating from a husband, since two of the women were contemplating leaving their husbands. (I guess it pays to plan ahead.)”<sup>52</sup> Meetings followed the needs of members, groups discussed the problems of individuals, and the women benefitted by learning about their shared experiences. The founding members understood that:

There is no such thing as a ‘typical’ single mother. Women from the highest and lowest income brackets, educational backgrounds, ages, and attitudes become single mothers. They are divorced, or widowed, or never-married. They are conservatives, radicals, or middle-of-the-roaders. They are men-chasers and they are lesbians. They are city women or country women. The only thing they have in common is their single motherhood.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Carol Powers, “No Fault Divorce,” *MOMMA: the newspaper/magazine for single mothers* vol. 1, no. 4 (March 1973), 3.

<sup>52</sup> Lin Hartwell, “A History of Momma,” *Sourcebook*, 379.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

That was where MOMMA began. Women shared their stories and formed bonds with others who might otherwise not have felt at all alike. General MOMMA meetings were held once a month, while planning council meetings were held once a week. But “there were ‘rap’ groups at someone’s house several times a week.”<sup>54</sup> And it was well-known among members that “if you need to talk some MOMMA talk, the chances were good you could find someplace to do it.”<sup>55</sup> In addition to helping create bonds among the members, the rap sessions also worked as therapy for individuals. Member Barbara Robertson described how she went to her first MOMMA meeting sad and afraid. She felt her loneliness disappear as she listened to other women share their feelings about divorce, children, and men – feelings she was sure many had never shared before. Robertson wrote that, “Each person was allowed uninterrupted time to free their souls, and the other women listened quietly, sympathetically. Advice was exchanged, suggestions offered, plans made. But most important was the listening itself. I felt understood.”<sup>56</sup> MOMMA’s mere existence mattered.

MOMMA’s existence mattered to individuals and to the larger social structure alike. The mere existence of so many single mothers in the decades after World War II forced society to change some attitudes about single motherhood. Coupled with the advent of the women’s movement, fundamental changes in the meaning of family and motherhood occurred. One of the most likely explanations for why MOMMA failed to spark a full-fledged Single Parents’ Liberation Movement in the U.S. concerns the timing and pace of change association with the concurrent women’s liberation movement. By the mid-1970s,

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 379.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

when MOMMA should have been ripe for reaching out to new recruits, social changes had already begun taking place that might have made such a movement seem unnecessary. Women were winning battles on all fronts, from legalizing abortion to condemning sexual harassment, and many of the issues MOMMA had begun to complain about seemed to be resolving themselves within this framework of progress. The only major issue remaining unfixed was childcare. President Richard Nixon had supported federally-funded childcare in 1969, but in 1971 he vetoed the Comprehensive Child Development Act he once supported, saying, "For the Federal Government to plunge headlong financially into supporting child development would commit the vast moral authority of the National Government to the side of communal approaches to child rearing over against [sic] the family-centered approach."<sup>57</sup> In addition, the issue did not resonate with young women's libbers who focused on equal access to education, work, and sex. Journalist and young feminist Anne Taylor Fleming remembers the tension between singletons and parents over issues of child care: "And if we said we were equal, who was going to give us child care, if and when we needed it, and across-the-board maternity leave? We should have insisted on it right then. The movement mothers, like the leaders of NOW (the National Organization for Women) did try to insist on it, but we eager young women plowing into the work force did not have babies on our mind."<sup>58</sup> On the issue of child care, single mothers were not alone. Any working mother might need access to child care, but after Nixon's veto in 1973, the issue remained untouchable, especially in light of the economic recession that hit shortly thereafter and the rising conservative

<sup>57</sup> Abby J. Cohen, "A Brief History of Federal Financing for Childcare in the United States," *The Future of Children* (Summer/Fall 1996), 32.

<sup>58</sup> Anne Taylor Fleming, *Motherhood Deferred: A Woman's Journey*, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), 134.

backlash against women's liberation and working and single mothers. Instead of seeing a Single Parents' Liberation movement grow, the latter half of the decade saw single mothers (and other women) trying to hold on to the changes they had won.

Like the women's liberation movement in general, grassroots movements to help single mothers spread and blossomed internationally during the '60s and '70s in places like the UK, Australia, and Canada. Despite the wide range of differences in social policies available within the welfare state governments of many of these Western industrialized nations, the need for local, grassroots organizations arose to assist single mothers with areas of life that government agencies could not or would not reach. In the UK, two organizations worked at different levels to aid single mothers. The National Council for the One Parent Family and the group Gingerbread both advocated on behalf of single parent families during these decades, focusing on the needs of single parents at both the legislative and the local levels. In July 1975, groups organized marches and a day of protest in London over the poor conditions of one-parent families, witnessing a much more active and evolved movement for Single Parent Liberation than in the U.S.A.

One of the great forces pushing for change on behalf of single parents in the 1970s in the UK was the National Council for the One Parent Families (NCOPF). The National Council for the One Parent Family was formerly known as the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child (NCUMC). The organization's roots dated back to the end of World War I when concerned activist Lettice Fisher launched a campaign to help unmarried, deserted, and widowed mothers, resulting in the creation of the NCUMC.<sup>59</sup> In 1971, at an "Extraordinary General Meeting," the decision was made by the Council "to

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<sup>59</sup> Hilary Macaskill, *From the Workhouse to the Workplace: 75 Years of One-Parent Family Life 1918-1993* (London: National Council for One Parent Families, Jan 1993).

change its name and role to include all one-parent families, catering for all lone parents whether unmarried, divorced, separated, or widowed.”<sup>60</sup> The group was known from then on as the National Council for One Parent Families. Historian Pat Thane recounted the group’s creation in her book *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?: Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth Century England*. Thane also traced the history of the organization and explained how England’s single parents faced the challenges of a shrinking welfare state and economic downturns in the late 1970s.<sup>61</sup>

The NCUMC had focused its energy on eliminating discrimination against illegitimate children by changing the Bastardy Laws, and on helping mothers find ways to support themselves and their children without resorting to the workhouse. The Council was “disturbed at the assumption that is so often made in discussions about population trends that illegitimate children are unwanted children” and they recognized that “unfortunately, hostility to unmarried mothers still exists today, but it tends to be centered on the fact of their having had a child, whereas previously it was because they had had intercourse outside marriage.”<sup>62</sup> Although it took 69 years, the NCUMC/NCOPF finally achieved its first goal in 1987 with the Family Law Reform Act, ending legal discrimination against illegitimate children<sup>63</sup>. During those years the group worked hard to achieve its second goal of helping mothers support themselves, but that turned out to be far more complicated than first anticipated, requiring changes in social attitudes and hiring practices, reforms of divorce laws, changes in legal settlements, added access to child

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>61</sup> Pat Thane and Tanya Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?: Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth Century England* (Oxford UP: 2012).

<sup>62</sup> The National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child, *Annual Report* (London: April 1971-March 1972), 4.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.



care, job training schemes, and a general acceptance of single mothers as normal and worthy citizens. In a treatise in 1970, the Council reported:

Unmarried mothers, like other unsupported mothers – widows, separated wives, and divorced women – need from society services over and above those that are necessary for two-parent families where there is a male wage-earner responsible. As Bishop Casey once said, “It is the Father’s role to provide the nest for the family to live in.” In this difficult world for women where wages are often too low to provide for a family, fatherless families need special financial provision often over and above what can be provided through maintenance or affiliated allowance. They need a number of practical services such as day care if they wish to work and to be independent. None of these services on their own, however, will be enough, especially for the unmarried mother. She needs, in order that she and her child shall not feel social outcasts, to be accepted on her merits as a good mother, as an ordinary member of the community. Otherwise, isolation, and the depression and apathy that can go with it, will not only affect her mental and physical health, but will reflect on her child.<sup>64</sup>

In this statement, the NCUMC acknowledged what so many other groups dealing with issues surrounding single motherhood understood: the late sixties and early seventies was a transition period, where activists could see potential improvements on the horizon, but still had to deal with the realities of a lingering patriarchal system that did not provide the conditions for successful single motherhood. The language of the statement betrayed the limits within which the NCUMC operated. On the one hand, they called for greater assistance for single mothers and decried the stigma against unmarried motherhood, while on the other hand they did not challenge the notion that father’s should be the primary breadwinners of families and almost apologized when asking for daycare services and supplemental support from the government to augment the low wages women earned. There was no call in the treatise for equal pay and one has to wonder when the NCUMC asked for special services to help an unmarried woman work and be

<sup>64</sup> Margaret Bramall, “The Effects of Society’s Attitudes on Single Mothers and the Services for Them,” *The Social Protection of Unmarried Mothers and their Children* (London, NCUMC: November 1970), 11.

independent, were they supporting her independence from men, or from government assistance? While the NCUMC/NCOPF made some headway on their second goal, the group admitted the work it has left to do. As reported in the history of the organization, “the National Council for One Parent Families can take the opportunity to look ahead to the achievement of many objectives it still wants to realize. These include: totally removing the stigma of being a lone parent; dismantling the barriers hindering lone parents who wish to return to work; ensuring the provision of available and affordable childcare; and preserving and optimizing benefits.”<sup>65</sup>

The National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child acted as both a public advocate for single mothers, trying to change public opinion about unmarried mothers and illegitimate children, and as a pressure group on the British government, trying to change legislation to provide assistance for single mothers. As the group announced during its Golden Jubilee year of 1968, “She and her child should be accepted as integrated members of the community. Society should provide financial and practical services that will give the child the maximum chance of a stable and settled upbringing.”<sup>66</sup> Single mothers gained agency in this new goal of complete integration into society and their status as victims requiring aid turned into demands for assistance on par with other benefits provided through the welfare state to citizens. In 1969, the Labour Government appointed a Royal Commission to investigate the problems of one-parent families and the NCUMC flew into action, preparing a report for the Commission called *Forward for the Fatherless*, published in 1971 and containing over 280 recommendations. *Forward for the Fatherless* described in great detail the web of issues affecting one-parent families,

<sup>65</sup> Marina Warner, “Introduction,” *From the Workhouse to the Workplace*, xi.

<sup>66</sup> Macaskill, *From Workhouse to Workplace*, 33. Women’s Library

including material needs and social problems. The NCUMC identified income as the underlying issue facing one-parent families and recommended that a cash allowance be implemented.<sup>67</sup> NCUMC linked poverty with a host of other problems facing single mothers, including their ability to reintegrate into society and participate actively in normal social situations. The report went so far as to point out that some single mothers who wanted to remarry (thus ending their deviant status as single mothers) could not enter the dating pool because of lack of funds. The report explained, “An unmarried mother, especially if her friends are not poor, is often embarrassed and humiliated by her shabby appearance.” And one single mother testified that, “My main problem until recently has been that I was alone every night as I could not afford a babysitter, so apart from my work I had no company.”<sup>68</sup> The NCUMC provided a comprehensive examination of life for one-parent families and waited expectantly for the results of the Royal Commission.

The Commission, headed by The Honorable Sir Morris Finer and known as the Finer Committee, issued its two-volume Report on One-Parent Families in July 1974 endorsing most of the NCUMC’s recommendations, including, “special cash allowances and improvements, to Supplemental Benefit and maintenance, to day care facilities, family courts and an end to discrimination in housing policies... It was an impressive document. *The Observer* called it ‘one of the major social documents of this century.’”<sup>69</sup> Like the NCUMC, the Finer Committee found that one-parent families required extra financial support and its central financial recommendation was the establishment of a “guaranteed maintenance allowance” or GMA which would have been a new kind of non-

<sup>67</sup> NCUMC, *Forward for the Fatherless* (London, May 1971). Women’s Library

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 591-592.

<sup>69</sup> Macaskill, *From the Workhouse to the Workplace*, 35.

contributory allowance for one-parent families. The Report explained that, “We have designed GMA very much with... choice in mind. It offers to the woman who decides to stay at home an income generally better than and free from some of the disadvantages of supplementary benefit; and to the woman who takes paid employment it offers a supplement to her earnings which gives her a worthwhile financial gain from working... One of the advantages of GMA is that, unlike supplementary benefits, it is particularly suitable for combination with part-time work, and it may be that one result of its introduction will be an increase in the numbers of those wanting to work part time.”<sup>70</sup> Expectations ran high among supporters of single parent families after the publication of the Finer Report and further coalitions formed, including the Finer Joint Action Committee which consisted of more than 28 groups, including the NCUMC which had changed its name during the writing of its report to the National Council for One Parent Families. As the NCOPF described in its history, “The prevailing mood during the Sixties and Seventies was that the State should accept responsibility for the one-parent family.”<sup>71</sup> Change was slow to happen, however, and in the early 1970s as the Finer Committee gathered data and as the NCUMC shifted focus to include single fathers, a new grassroots organization, Gingerbread, established roots to provide immediate relief to the growing numbers of single parent families. Groups working on behalf of single parents in the U.K. expanded in the 1970s in ways that propelled a full-fledged Single Parents’ Liberation Movement. They organized constituents, reached out to other agencies and supporters, and built structures which would help sustain their work into the future.

<sup>70</sup> *Report of the Committee on One-Parent Families* (London, July 1974), 18.

<sup>71</sup> Macaskill, *From the Workhouse*, 36.

During the 1970s, the National Council for One Parent Families continued its long tradition of helping single mothers, and subsequently single fathers, negotiate the bureaucracy associated with finding aid from charities and the government. NCOPF also continued to advocate for more legislative reform in the hopes that some of the recommendations it made to the Finer Commission might come to fruition. While agencies waited for change, single parents continued work at the grassroots level in order to provide immediate help with the kinds of problems that formal organizations would not or could not tackle. Self-help groups formed to provide assistance to single parents with every day issues like housing, child care, and basic survival information, and, probably most importantly, to provide a sense of community for parents who faced lives of isolation. The group Gingerbread was a “self help association for one parent families. It was started in January 1970 by a young woman bringing up two sons on her own who decided it would be a good idea for one parent families to get together to exchange information and advice and to help each other generally.”<sup>72</sup> Founding mother Tessa Fothergill, a.k.a. Raga Woods, of London, had such a struggle being a single parent after the break-up of her marriage that she “set up a self-help group. A *Sunday Times* feature about her encourage[d] hundreds of other single parents to get in touch, and Gingerbread, the new charity, [wa]s born.”<sup>73</sup> A 1993 interview described her Bohemian existence at the time:

By Christmas 1969, she was facing homelessness. 'I spent Christmas Eve putting up posters round Bayswater saying, 'Mother and two kids need home,' ' she says. 'Nothing happened. I was going down the Bayswater Road and I saw a cafe called 'Golden Age Gingerbread.' I really liked the name. I went home and started to think that there must be a lot of people like myself, alone with children, having a desperate time.' Someone told her about a new magazine called Time Out, which published a story about her idea of a support group. The Observer ran a piece illustrated by her in a

<sup>72</sup> “About Gingerbread,” *Gingerbread: The Magazine For One Parent Families* (London, July/August 1975), 1.

<sup>73</sup> <http://www.gingerbread.org.uk/content/442/Our-history>

mini-skirt and sacks of mail followed. Gingerbread, now flourishing with 250 groups nationwide, had begun.<sup>74</sup>

Fothergill's idea appealed to the rising numbers of single parents in the U.K. Like MOMMA in the U.S.A., Gingerbread was created by single parents out of a need that was not being met by outside organizations.

The social and economic conditions of the late sixties and early seventies created an atmosphere where the growing numbers of single parents began to expect positive changes in their situations and consequently acted on those expectations. As the divorce rate rose after World War II and after Parliament enacted the Divorce Act in 1969 loosening divorce restrictions, the make-up on single parent families shifted from widows and unwed mothers to a wide range of possibilities. Existing organizations, like the National Council for the Unwed Mother and her Child were not prepared and had no experience helping single fathers, abandoned women, women whose husbands were imprisoned, and others in a state of parenting limbo. When single parents responded to Fothergill's idea in early 1970, they felt united because of their status as lone parents, despite the method by which they came to be single parents. The group made a concerted effort to include all lone parents and advertised that point: "Gingerbread is an association for one parent families, that is where any parent, whether divorced, separated, widowed, unmarried, or one whose partner is seriously disabled, in hospital, absent for a long period or in prison, is bringing up a child or children single handed. It is unique as a national organization in that, not only does it cover every category of one parent family but it is run mainly by lone parents themselves."<sup>75</sup> The organizers

<sup>74</sup> Sandra Barwick, "The Perfect 20<sup>th</sup> Century Bohemian," *The Independent* (30 July 1993).

<sup>75</sup> Draft – A Regional Plan for Gingerbread, Women's Library box 102 file 5/opf/9/4/2

understood that all parents raising children without a partner shared similar difficulties and that they could help one another if they united under a broad banner.

Gingerbread identified areas where local associations could make the most difference and focused on compiling resources and organizing self-help activities. In addition to providing assistance navigating the bureaucracy involved in applying for state aid, Gingerbread focused much of its energy on providing day-to-day services to enhance the quality of life for one-parent families. They organized babysitting services, arranged family-friendly outings, set up group holidays, and identified available housing for single parents. Much of the group's efforts went into community-building and providing friendship and company for one another. Like MOMMA, Gingerbread started its own magazine and published information important to single parent families. They explained their main objectives in a 1976 article:

One parent families face two over-whelming problems – social isolation and poverty. No Government can legislate for loneliness, no Act of Parliament can stave off the emotional upheaval of the loss of a partner. Here self-help comes into its own. The moral support and social activities offered by Gingerbread groups provide the ideal answer – for parents and children. Outings, holidays, parties, coffee evenings, talking through problems with others who really understand what it's like, having someone to turn to when things are too much and building up your confidence.<sup>76</sup>

Gingerbread members understood that one's attitude played a key role in becoming a successful single parent. Transitioning into single parenthood could be devastating, especially for those parents whose partners abandoned them or died unexpectedly. Even those single parents who ended unhappy relationships and who greeted solo parenting as a positive alternative needed the understanding and commiseration of others in similar

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<sup>76</sup> Peter Bishop, Ruth Cohen, Rose Knight, Joy Ulings, Tess Woodcraft, "Comments," *Gingerbread: The Magazine for One Parent Families* (July/August 1976, issue no. 24), 1. Women's Library

situations in order to keep their own attitudes positive. In this way, Gingerbread was able to find a way to combat one of the possible negative consequences of single parenthood which the NCUMC had warned against in its 1971 report to the Finer Commission:

The effects of being an unmarried mother on a girl or woman's social life will depend very much on the individual circumstances of her situation and of her attitude towards it. Some mothers have the personality and resilience to live satisfactory lives. Some are already part of a community and their situation alters comparatively little. The attitude of the people around her will have a very great influence not only in the mother's feelings about herself, but in the actual opportunities she has to become integrated with the community and to live a full life.<sup>77</sup>

If successful single parenting rested greatly on the attitude of the mother or father, then one tangible way to help single parents was by fostering a positive atmosphere and tending to each individual's emotional needs. Groups like Gingerbread fostered normalcy amongst single parent families and helped spread the message that single parents were like everyone else. One single mother wrote, "What, exactly, are we after? And how do we hope to achieve it? I mean on the personal family level – not the national, campaigning, public side which seeks to alter official attitudes and legalities. All that is quite a different question. We want, I suppose, happiness – like everybody else... It sounds very ordinary, and that's the whole point."<sup>78</sup> While waiting for government reforms that might never materialize, members of Gingerbread worked to make immediate changes in their everyday lives.

A set of unique problems surrounded groups like Gingerbread and MOMMA, which were run by the single mothers and fathers themselves. Single parents had a special set

<sup>77</sup> NCUMC, *Forward for the Fatherless: Memorandum for the Committee on One Parent Families* (London: NCUMC, May 1971), 151.

<sup>78</sup> Diana Davenport, *One Parent Families: A Practical Guide to Coping* (London and Sydney: Pan Original Panbooks, 1979), 15.



of limitations on their time as they were the sole breadwinners, parents, housekeepers, and adults responsible for their families. A single parent was not an individual entity, but a being with dependents requiring constant attention. Members had time restrictions as well as limited funds of their own to contribute to the running of the group. Gingerbread acknowledged the tension inherent in grassroots organizing:

As a self help association, Gingerbread has tremendous advantages as well as constraints. Because it is run by one parent families themselves there is a feeling of companionship and the knowledge that people are talking from experiencing rather than from what they have read in books. But, by the very nature of their situations, members have more responsibilities and less time for outside interests. This is true not only in the local groups but right through to the annually elected Central Committee and the Central Office. The fact that members overcome these difficulties to join forces shows the vital need for the kind of support Gingerbread gives.<sup>79</sup>

Members participated at whatever level their own personal situations allowed. While the group maintained a national headquarters in London run by the Central Committee, the organization's strength lay in its regional offices, staffed by local members and run by parents.

The members of Gingerbread who established the group in 1970 committed themselves to the project and donated their time, supplies, and homes in order to get Gingerbread up and running. "For the first two years of its existence Gingerbread was run solely on voluntary help from members' homes. In January 1972 the Rowntree Social Service Trust granted to Gingerbread the use of an office in central London."<sup>80</sup> The fact that single parents felt the need to go to these lengths to help themselves illustrated two points: 1) state-sponsored welfare did not provide comprehensive assistance and 2) single parents' attitudes had shifted to view themselves as citizens worthy of "normal"

<sup>79</sup> *Gingerbread: The Magazine For One Parent Families* (July/August 1975, issue no. 18), 1.

<sup>80</sup> *Gingerbread* issue no. 24

lives. One-parent families saw a place for themselves in regular society and, through Gingerbread, began to carve out their own legitimate space. In its own recommendations to the Finer Commission, Gingerbread pointed out ways that the state could help parents help themselves. In particular, “We recommend that local authorities should be encouraged to give support to viable single parent groups. The provision of an office, a room for meetings, and a grant towards the administrative costs have been made by some authorities and it would be extremely helpful if this practice could be followed in other places where there is need.”<sup>81</sup> Gingerbread created a space for single parents to help shape policies and create programs that they needed most.

One of the fundamental changes that took place in the 1970s amongst groups that had advocated on behalf of single mothers related to the inclusion of single fathers as a legitimate constituency in need of assistance. Both the NCUMC and Gingerbread recognized the plight of single fathers and worked to incorporate their needs into the larger aims of assisting single mothers. To this end, the NCUMC changed its name to the National Council of One Parent Families and set forth collecting data on the needs of single fathers and sharing information with the government. Gingerbread featured single fathers in their magazine articles and included them in organizing from the group’s inception. In comparison with the U.S. groups Parents Without Partners and MOMMA, groups in the U.K. showed a greater understanding of the needs of single fathers and worked to push for legislative reforms and provide assistance that would directly impact them. As discussed previously, Parents Without Partners accepted fathers with or without custody of their children as members, but seemed to do so not as an effort to normalize

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<sup>81</sup> Gingerbread submission to the Finer Commission, July 1971. Women’s Library 7cms/04/11 folder marriage and family papers, 20 #45.

single parenthood, but in fact to recreate the traditional nuclear family. MOMMA acknowledged in its charter that it would allow single fathers to join, but the group's name "The Organization for Single Mothers" and its feminist rhetoric may have alienated dads. The women in MOMMA seemed angry at men, as many American feminists seemed at the time, and they focused on the female aspects of single parenthood, although they did feature an article in their magazine on single fathers. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, single fathers in the U.S.A. eventually formed their own groups and focused on issues relevant to the male experience of being a single parent. In the U.K., organizations included single fathers early in the 1970s, thus alleviating any need for separation.

Gingerbread helped to bring about more attention to the plight of single fathers and advocated to have their needs addressed by the State by reporting on the conditions of single fatherhood and collecting data and interviews with fathers. Very early in the seventies, single fathers brought to light the inequity between benefits provided by the State for single mothers and themselves. The government had long-established programs to provide aid for single mothers and charity groups operated on their behalf; for decades only single mothers needed aid. Traditional gender roles in employment, marriage, and family had provided help for men who found themselves alone with children in the past. In the majority of cases, men became lone fathers due to the death of their wife and female relatives or neighbors stepped in to help with child care or men could afford to hire help. Fatherhood typically meant providing money and authority for the family, and most men remarried quickly. By the end of the sixties, though, the conditions of single fatherhood had shifted. More fathers came to single fatherhood through divorce than death of a spouse and many found themselves without available family or community

assistance<sup>82</sup>. The nature of fatherhood had also begun to change and a number of fathers wanted to take a more active role in the day-to-day care of their children. They faced similar challenges as single mothers, but the established institutions did not recognize their needs and so provided little to no help. Gingerbread uncovered these discrepancies and, in the early years, worked to showcase the great difficulty single fathers experienced and highlight the inadequate support they received. Gingerbread reported to the Finer Commission in 1971:

The problems of the male single parent receive considerably less attention than the problems of the female single parent, although in many ways his problems may be greater. A man with eight children from 6 to 15 years of age wrote: I returned to full time work as Social Security's ultimatum 'neglect your children or all starve' left me with little alternative. I am sure there is no need for me to go into detail as to how my children are still neglected at the instigation of the State. As far as I am concerned, for my children, social security does not exist and the Department operates under a misnomer.<sup>83</sup>

The Social Security Department did not provide cash allowances to single fathers as they were seen as employable and therefore required to work. However, many of the fathers also reported that they were not entitled to benefits to help with child care, thereby creating a situation where single fathers could feel pressured to give up their children to state agencies. One single father described this situation: "I am a divorced man age 35 with three children. At present my children are being looked after in a Children's Home seventy miles away. I very much wish to have them home with me, but my main difficulty is the period when the children are on holiday from school when I should need someone to look after them during the day whilst I am at work."<sup>84</sup> Benefits provided to single

<sup>82</sup> Rt Hon Barbara Castle, MP, "Speech by the Secretary of State for Social Services to the National Council of One Parent Families" *Conference on the Finer Report: Caxton Hall, 21 Feb 1975*

<sup>83</sup> Gingerbread, Submission to the Finer Commission (July 1971), 10.

<sup>84</sup> Janet Hadley and David Webb, *As We See It: Voices of Lone Parents* (London: Gingerbread, 1975), 3.

mothers, despite the problems associated with the system, often kept mothers and their children together. Policies echoed the words of Shirley Frost at a symposium in 1970: "I am assuming that the majority of single mothers want and are capable of bringing up their own children. So the best type of substitute care reinforces this ideal: in other words keep the mother and child together, rather than separating them entirely."<sup>85</sup> Gingerbread wanted to extend this ideal to single fathers as well.

As the decade progressed, Gingerbread (and the NCOPF) recognized the importance of uniting all single parents. By working together, single mother and fathers could potentially bring about greater changes for all one parent families and work to normalize their family types. Instead of focusing on the ways that men and women differed as single parents, Gingerbread pushed to make changes that would help any single parent. At a 1973 symposium, the chairman of the Social Policy Committee of Gingerbread explained:

The problems of the lone father were very similar to those of the lone mother. It would be a mistake to concentrate only on the *differences* between the two types of one-parent families and overlook the difficulties that *all* of them are likely to experience. For this reason Gingerbread has sought to bring together all one-parent families, whether it be a father or a mother who is left with the responsibility of bringing up children alone and regardless of whether it is widowhood, desertion or single parenthood which has caused that parent to be alone.<sup>86</sup>

Uniting single mothers and fathers furthered the creation of a Single Parents' Liberation movement by reaching across gender lines and bringing a greater awareness to the inequality between one-parent and two-parent families.

<sup>85</sup> Shirley Frost, "Sharing Responsibility for the Child," NCUMC Symposium (19 Nov 1970). Women's Library

<sup>86</sup> Cyril Smith, "The Viewpoint of the Consumer," *Fathers Alone: Report of a Symposium* (London: NCUMC, 19 July 1973), 6. Women's Library

Gingerbread's campaign to influence government agencies and reform policies to include both single mother *and* fathers started to make headway in 1975. Parliament recognized the need to make changes in existing policy to include male lone parents and also began to see the ways in which legal reforms needed to be changed to reflect late-twentieth century gender roles and how they had changed. The Secretary of State for Social Services' symposium speech addressing the Finer Report showcased changing government ideals:

In the group of 620,000 families, there are more lone fathers – 100,000 of them – than there are unmarried mothers (never married). I believe we have to increasingly to recognize the interdependence of the sexes in our society today, the fact that at some stage in their lives most mothers and fathers are driven to exchange their traditional roles. We ought to prepare and provide for this. It is first and foremost a question of attitude and mind and I think we are taking an important step in changing attitudes in our Better Pensions Bill, due to be published soon, in which for the first time ever we provide for widowers to benefit. For the first time ever we recognize that a husband has the right to benefit in certain circumstances from his wife's wage-earning activities. We have made a break-through in the concept of 'dependency' being a one-sided situation.<sup>87</sup>

Despite the Labour Government of the mid-1970's operating as a minority government and facing a recent recession and high inflation rates, Members of Parliament appeared willing to support, at least in theory, some of the changes that groups like Gingerbread proposed to help single parent families.

By summer of 1975, Gingerbread and the National Council of One Parent Families, along with other members of the Joint Action Committee, decided that the government had not acted quickly or adequately enough on the recommendations of the Finer Commission. Marches were organized in London and Edinburgh for July 2, 1975, the

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<sup>87</sup> Rt Hon Barbara Castle, MP, "Speech by the Secretary of State for Social Services to the National Council of One Parent Families" *Conference on the Finer Report: Caxton Hall, 21 Feb 1975*

anniversary of the publication of the Finer Report, where “6,000 lone parents and their children demonstrated... to demand Government action on the Report’s 230 recommendations.”<sup>88</sup> In London, demonstrators marched from Hyde Park to Trafalger Square, chanting: What do we want? A Finer future! When do we want it? Now! Protestors carried signs and placards reading: A Finer Future For One Parent Families, Help One Parent Families, and Give Our Children Finer Keys Not Latch-Keys.<sup>89</sup> Speakers from Gingerbread, the National Council of One Parent Families and Members of Parliament addressed the crowds, where they were reminded that Gingerbread means “gingering up the authorities for more bread for one parent families!” The general theme of the speeches focused on the need for more cash assistance for single parent families and the implementation of the recommendations made in the Finer Report. The rally ended with musical acts, including Annie Lennox, performing for the demonstrators in the hot summer sun.<sup>90</sup>

The demonstration in Edinburgh was considerably smaller than the London march, with about 1,000 protestors and supporters in attendance.<sup>91</sup> The Scottish Finer day only lasted about half an hour, but reports indicated that the press coverage was “extremely good, bearing in mind that the Queen was arriving in Edinburgh that day also.”<sup>92</sup>

Those who participated in the demonstrations felt exhilarated and full of hope that they could make a show of force to encourage Parliament to finally act on the Finer Report’s recommendations. Members of Gingerbread came away extremely proud of the

<sup>88</sup> Gingerbread, vol. 18, 1.

<sup>89</sup> Gingerbread, vol. 18, cover and Gingerbread issue no. 24, cover.

<sup>90</sup> Gingerbread, issue no. 24, 6.

<sup>91</sup> Gingerbread, vol. 18,10.

<sup>92</sup> Gingerbread, vol. 18, 10.

success of the rally, as it was the first time they had organized such a large and public event. Organizing single parents take special effort, even at a small group level, as single parents face unique challenges of child care and work responsibilities: they often have no help. So the organizers of the event had to take into consideration all of logistics that single parents would need, including special accommodations for the children. Gingerbread reported that, "Parents left their children at Westminster Cathedral Hall where things were a bit chaotic since there were so many more children than we had anticipated – but Harrow Gingerbread bravely struggled on cutting hundreds of sandwiches, pouring gallons of orange juice, and Danny Lee the entertainer kept the children happy."<sup>93</sup> It was important to include the children in the day's events for several reasons: much of the rhetoric encouraging the Government to provide more assistance focused on the needs of the children; it made a visual impact having small children marching and carrying banners; and it highlighted wide variety of people living in one parent families who would be affected by legislative reform. The day's events also brought together outside supporters of single parent families, one major goal Gingerbread's leaders. They reported that the National Council for One Parent Families, Child Poverty Action Group, British Association of Social Workers, and Prisoners' Wives Association actively joined the demonstration.<sup>94</sup> But both the London and Edinburgh organizers felt that further commitment from outside supporters would be needed in order to successfully lobby the Government for increased support, especially during the economic downturn of the mid-1970s. Gingerbread identified women's organizations, organizations for children, and trade unions as potential targets. The Edinburgh

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<sup>93</sup> Gingerbread, vol. 18, 6.

<sup>94</sup> Gingerbread, vol. 18, 6.



contingent reported a disappointing turnout at their rally by “other voluntary organizations, social and community workers and the like.”<sup>95</sup> Gingerbread learned a number of lessons and came away from the Finer Day Demonstrations with a renewed sense of purpose and aim.

In terms of identifying the struggle for single parents’ rights, the Finer Day Demonstration reinforces the claim that one parent families in the U.K. created a social movement for Single Parents’ Liberation. They achieved all three stages necessary to define a social movement, as outlined by Wade Horn: they set an agenda, recruited outside members for support, and created organizations to sustain their efforts. The importance of this feat should not be overlooked. As Gingerbread commented:

Five years ago, before Gingerbread was set up, July 2<sup>nd</sup>'s demonstration could never have happened. One parent families were isolated from each other, making ends meet as best they could... In getting together and talking over common problems, one parent families have become aware that because we share the same economic problems, and because it is almost impossible to find personal solutions, however hard you try – the answer must lie in Government policy. If one parent families have a right to a decent standard of living and self respect, then Government and Local Authorities must provide facilities which would enable us to grasp those rights.<sup>96</sup>

At any point, the process of creating a social movement could have derailed, as it seemed to have done in the U.S.A. Members faced overwhelming challenges on their time and money, which often made it difficult to be involved in outside activities requiring such a serious commitment of resources. Mothers, in particular, have a history of being unable to commit themselves to political work due to the responsibilities of family and work.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Gingerbread, vol. 18, 10.

<sup>96</sup> Gingerbread, vol. 18, 1.

<sup>97</sup> Mothers were often unable to come to the extended meetings/rap sessions held by radical feminist organizations in the late sixties and early seventies. Mothers in the Black Power movement were also seen as being unable to commit to the cause, due to their divided attentions, and often told to choose between the two.

But conditions in the U.K. made it possible for a social movement in support of single parent families to flourish. The long history of activism on behalf of widows and unwed mothers, as represented by the National Council for the Unwed Mother and her Child, combined with the post-World War II Welfare State established conditions favorable to the establishment of a widespread movement for Single Parents' Liberation.

By comparing the creation of single parent organizations in the U.S.A. and the U.K., several themes emerged highlighting the situation of single mothers and fathers in both countries. In general, the rise of single motherhood and single fatherhood was connected to the growing number of divorces in 1960s and throughout the 1970s. Single mothers and fathers both faced financial hardships that were not addressed by the respective country's state-run welfare programs, despite some differences in the availability of benefits between men and women. Self-help groups like MOMMA and Gingerbread focused on many of the emotional and social problems single mothers and fathers faced that social workers and legislators could not address, especially loneliness and friendship. By the mid-1970s, groups in both the U.S. and U.K. adopted a rights' based perspective and advanced their aims using rhetoric that aimed to normalize the single parent family as well as advance the rights of parents in general. In the U.S., MOMMA demanded gender equality which they viewed as the key to single mothers' ability to provide for their own families without government assistance. In the U.K., Gingerbread and the National Council for One Parent Families pressed for cash allowances for single parent families and greater government assistance on par with already existing social benefits for other citizens. During the 1970s, a burgeoning Single

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Mothers were criticized for leaving their children and seen as bad mothers when they participated in social movements. Viola Liuzzo, a Civil Rights activist who was killed in the American South, is an extreme example.

Parents' Liberation Movement appeared in both the U.S. and U.K., establishing an agenda for greater rights for single parents, normalization of the one parent family type, and legislative reforms to assist single parent families. The British movement reached a higher level of organization and publicity, culminating in a day of demonstrations in July 1975, while the movement in the U.S. seemed to fade into obscurity.

In a comparison between British and German lone parent organizations, researcher Andreas Hoff tried to understand the motivation of single parents to come together and to determine whether or not welfare state policies impacted the organization of informal support groups. He concluded that, "Whilst informal support networks influence the utilisation of formal support, variations in welfare state provisions do not appear to have a significant impact on informal support mobilisation."<sup>98</sup> Hoff's original hypothesis had posited that because the British welfare system provided fewer monetary benefits than the German welfare state, that British lone parents would organize more informally to provide assistance and resources. But that was not the case. Hoff found instead that social structure, family values, and gender roles mattered more than the level of aid provided by welfare states. The comparison of U.S. and U.K. single parent groups in this chapter also supports Hoff's final conclusion. British one parent families had greater benefits available to them than their American counterparts, however, their level of organizing informal support groups appeared to be greater and more successful than those in the U.S. The informal support groups in both countries worked to help single mothers and fathers navigate the increasingly complicated state bureaucracy associated with getting assistance. For example, in the late 1970's, "Much of the Council's (NCOPF)

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<sup>98</sup> Andreas Hoff, *Lone Mothers Between the Welfare State and Informal Support: A Cross-National Comparison of Germany and the United Kingdom* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 7.

staff time was spent providing guidance through the maze. Within the Council's role the emphasis shifted from social work to welfare rights and in 1979 the Social Work Department was renamed the Advice and Rights Department."<sup>99</sup> Both Gingerbread and MOMMA also dedicated space in the publications to explaining how to apply for benefits and what type of aid was available from government agencies. Despite the fact that the U.S. and U.K. provided different amounts and kinds of benefits for their citizens, it was the combination of across-the-board poverty for single parent families and changes in social attitudes in both countries that led to the formation of Single Parents' Liberation groups.<sup>100</sup>

The parents who joined the movement to elevate the status of single parents did not identify themselves as part of a "Liberation Movement," although in the parlance of the times, they certainly could have associated themselves with other minority groups fighting for liberation from oppression. They wanted many of the same things as other liberation groups: legislative reforms to create equality between them and the rest of society (in this case, two-parent families), normalization of their status as citizens, and greater economic opportunities. But for many single parents, liberation in the 1970s was far more personal than political. As one author described it, "Splitting up and single parenthood is often a liberating rather than a debilitating experience, not only for women, but also for men, and for the children involved."<sup>101</sup> Most of the single parent families in

<sup>99</sup> Macaskill, *From Workhouse to Workplace*, 37.

<sup>100</sup> In *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain: From Footnote to Front Page* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), the authors trace the evolution of the status of the unwed mother throughout the twentieth century and they found that in the 1960s and 1970s, single motherhood had become normalized to the point that even unwed mothers (with illegitimate children) had become significantly less stigmatized. The rise of divorced single mothers, with legitimate children, and the appearance of single father headed families unified one-parent families and emphasized their common material needs.

<sup>101</sup> Catherine Itzin, *Splitting Up: Single-Parent Liberation* (London: Virago, 1980), 1.

this decade formed after divorce, which can be a traumatic and chaotic experience. The women and men who emerged after their trials felt liberated from the constraints of their former lives and saw their new one parent families as a chance for positive change and success. The single mothers and fathers of the 1970s created a movement for change, challenging the status quo by their mere existence and demanding liberation from the margins of society.

## CHAPTER 3 FEMINIST MOTHERHOOD: SINGLE MOTHERS AND THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

*As my mother says, "You do all the things I wish I could have done." I'm sure it's because she programmed me to!*<sup>102</sup> – Beth Heiden Reid (Baby Boom daughter)

In 1971, feminist author Andre Leon criticized society for undervaluing women's carework. "Woman's work is defined as child bearing, child raising, and housework," Leon wrote. "That's what every little girl is told she will do when she 'grows up.' She is taught to think of 'women's work' as her *main* goal in life, and to be proud of thinking this way – since everything in the culture engraves this image upon her mind. Probably her mother was a housewife and she will be one too. Such is the rigidity of the sexual caste system."<sup>103</sup> As Leon pointed out the problems with this strict gender ideology, she also revealed the assumption that gendered ideology about motherhood and marriage was transmitted between generations without change. While the mass media, government institutions, and religious organizations certainly perpetuated the idea that good mothers inculcated in their daughters a proper sense of domesticity, mothers of the baby boom had been quietly altering the message in ways that would have unforeseen consequences. Where many critics, including bona fide feminists, tended to see mothers of the baby boom as complicit in perpetuating the sexual hierarchy, I would argue that mothers of the baby boom played an important role in shaping the expectations and goals of their daughters. By 1971, when Andre Leon penned her feminist tract, baby boom

<sup>102</sup> Julie Kettle Gundlach, *My Mother Before Me* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Lyle Stuart, Inc.), 177.

<sup>103</sup> Andre Leo, "ADC: Marriage to the State," In Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone, ed. *Radical Feminism* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973), 222. This article first appeared in *Notes From the Third Year* copyright 1971.

daughters had begun to renegotiate their ideologies of motherhood and marriage, overwhelmingly choosing to abandon the ways of their mothers. Baby boom daughters tended to postpone childbirth, marry later in life, divorce more frequently, and work longer in careers. This chapter addresses reasons why white middle-class daughters of the baby boom generation rejected the lifestyles and maternal attitudes of their mothers. Further, it explores how this affected the ideology of motherhood among baby boom women, focusing on the increase of single motherhood by the 1970s. Finally, the chapter contextualizes groups like MOMMA, discussing their existence within the framework of feminism. It argues that the rise of feminist single mothers in the 1970s is connected to the long struggle for gender equality as well as the specific, gendered experiences of the mothers of the Baby Boom.

Daughters of the baby boom certainly were not the first generation to reject their mothers' ideas about parenting. For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, it became normal for daughters to turn to new professional and scientific advice about mothering. One mother in the 1920s justified scientific motherhood when she explained, "Just because your mother and your grandmother did it I didn't think that was the best thing. I was a modern mother and the modern way was to go to a specialist."<sup>104</sup> They began to see the practices and opinions of their mothers as "old-fashioned." While it was not unusual for daughters to reject the advice of their mothers, the conflict between baby boom daughters and their mothers seemed *personal*. It was not just the old-fashioned ideas that baby boomers rejected, but rather that young women wanted to avoid making their mothers' mistakes. In addition, the young women of the baby boom generation, in

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<sup>104</sup> Rima D. Apple, *Perfect Motherhood: Science and Childrearing in America* (New Brunswick: NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2006), 88.

their efforts to incorporate new ideas about feminism into their lives, had what one feminist historian believes was a unique relationship with their mothers' generation: Karen Payne argues that "it is only during the most recent wave of feminism in the 1970s that a woman's relationship with her mother has been seen as such a crucial issue in her journey toward liberation."<sup>105</sup>

Many mothers of the baby boom generation actively influenced their daughters to create new opportunities for themselves and to expect lives different from their own. Historian Wini Breines, in her comparison of baby boomers and their mothers, gives agency to the daughters and places a great emphasis on social conditions of the 1960s. She argues that the baby boomers "used their mothers as negative models" and states that the "women's liberation movement intervened between our mothers and ourselves."<sup>106</sup> While both of these conclusions are important factors in analyzing the changes between the generations, it assumes that mothers in the 1950s ignored their unhappiness and the changing social and economic landscapes and continued to raise their daughters in their own image. Instead, if we allow for more agency on the part of fifties' mothers, we can conclude that mothers in the fifties and sixties laid the groundwork for changes in the ideology of motherhood and marriage in the following decades. As historian Elaine Tyler May explains, "They encouraged their children – implicitly if not explicitly – to follow new paths. Frustrated women and exhausted men provided ambiguous role models for children hoping to avoid the discontent of their mothers and

<sup>105</sup>105 Karen Payne, *Between Ourselves: Letters Between Mothers and Daughters, 1750-1982* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1983), xiv.

<sup>106</sup> Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1992), 77-82.



the pressure and ill health the stresses of the workplace had inflicted on their fathers.”<sup>107</sup> As the baby boom generation came of age, they began to renegotiate gender roles and social institutions, creating a space for alternative family types, including single-parent families. As Terry Arendell argues, “Fueling the ideological debates about mothers’ roles, and women’s roles more generally, is the increase in single motherhood and the growing separation of marriage and maternity.”<sup>108</sup>

Post-World War II American ideology encouraged women to find complete personal fulfillment in the roles of housewife and mother. Historians have shown how this expectation broke down by the sixties and helped to usher in the feminist movement, which refuted the assumption that women’s identity could be found solely in these domestic roles. Feminists advocated for women’s active participation in the work force, among other things, as a means to achieve personal satisfaction. Even mothers, they argued, should work outside the home; they would be happier, enjoy their children more, and become better parents.<sup>109</sup> Further, feminists challenged fathers to become more involved in day-to-day child care and housework. Ideally, both parents would share responsibility for parenting, housework, and breadwinning. This shift in parenting ideology would reflect a change for both fathers and mother from the fifties’ family. Social mores of the 1950s had encouraged baby boomers’ mothers to devote themselves to the care and well-being of their families. Their children and husband created their identity.

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<sup>107</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1988), 217.

<sup>108</sup> Terry Arendell, “Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood: The Decade’s Scholarship” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62, 4 (1982).

<sup>109</sup> See Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004) or Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1963).

Julia, a young woman who would become a mother of the baby boom, explained the ideology of the day:

I not only expected to get married, I consciously looked forward to marriage as a form of identity. You see, I was identified as Carleton Harmon's daughter, Carleton and Ella's dutiful daughter, who had a great future. My agenda was college, graduation, marriage, perhaps travel, perhaps a job or two, but the right, the best marriage, and then home and family. The direction behind my entire education, I believe, was to make us better, fuller people so that we would be better wives. I was following the pattern my mother followed. My highest ambition was to build the same kind of home that I had come from.<sup>110</sup>

White, middle-class girls believed that their college educations should be used to make them better mothers. Even though the 1950s saw a marked increase in the number of mothers working outside the home, popular culture still equated womanhood with mother- and wifehood. Feminists of the 1960s and 1970s argued that by becoming individuals in and of themselves the daughters of the baby boom would not fall prey to the neuroses that plagued fifties' moms. Additionally, feminists believed, the increased participation of fathers in everyday childrearing would help men feel less distant from their families and close the gap between men and women, the public and private spheres.

While some of the attitudes about parenting changed, popular culture continued to maintain the importance of the nuclear family as the status quo. As researchers of the family explained in the mid-1970s, "In our own society, the nuclear model defines what is normal and natural both for research and 'therapy,' and subtly influences our thinking to regard deviations from the nuclear family as sick or perverse or immoral."<sup>111</sup> New ideas about parenting refashioned the nuclear family, so it required both a father and mother.

<sup>110</sup> Brett Harvey, *The Fifties: A Women's Oral History* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 15.

<sup>111</sup> Arlene S. Skolnick and Jerome H. Skolnick, *Family in Transition: Rethinking Marriage, Sexuality, Child Rearing, and Family Organization* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1977, 1971), 4.

Many middle-class baby boomers delayed having children, but they still placed an importance on marriage and family. In fact, they seemed to believe that their marriages were “better” and their children more loved, because they *chose* to get married and have kids, as opposed to their parents who did the same because it was expected. In an era of personal rights and the rhetoric of choice, the act of choosing was key.

Ironically, part of this choice included the right to divorce. Many women, having seen their mothers remain in unhappy marriages, took advantage of new no-fault divorce laws after 1970. Middle-age women also divorced at an increasing rate, finally ending unhappy marriages endured through the fifties and sixties when there seemed no way out.<sup>112</sup> The decades of the seventies and eighties witnessed an unprecedented increase in the number of divorces among families with children, creating a new generation of single mothers, many of whom were what one seventies’ single mother called the “products of the middle and upper class divorce.”<sup>113</sup> “I don’t know whether it’s just my family and friends,” one single mother explained, “or just Boston in particular, but it seems like when there’s children involved, people stay together, no matter how miserable they are. I’m sorry, I’ve got a whole life ahead of me and I’m not staying... I realized I wasn’t doing anything to her [her daughter]. I’m helping her, if nothing else.”<sup>114</sup> While nuclear families changed some of the parenting norms, an examination of single mothers reveals practical and ideological shifts in mothering that would eventually be embraced by more mainstream parents later in the century. Single mothers tended to give children more

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<sup>112</sup> Jessica Weiss, *To Have and To Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 188.

<sup>113</sup> Dorothy O’Connor, “The FAP Fizzle or Poverty and the Single Mother,” *Momma: The Newspaper/Magazine for Single Mothers*, vol. 1, no. 4 (March 1973), 1.

<sup>114</sup> Karol Hope and Nancy Young, *Momma: The Sourcebook for Single Mothers* (New York: The New American Library, 1976), pg.39.

responsibility for themselves and included them as shareholders in the family as opposed to mere dependents. As more married mothers entered the workforce in the eighties, this view of parenting became far more normal. Parenting magazines and sociological studies alike reveal how parents moved toward including children in household chores, decision-making, and personal responsibility.

There continues to be nostalgia for America in the fifties and a mythology surrounds that decade's family. Historian Jessica Weiss notes that, "American family life in the 1950s is the standard that critics use to judge family life today."<sup>115</sup> But it is the myth of family life that is held up to criticize modern parents: just imagine the harmonious family in *Leave it to Beaver* reruns. Stephanie Coontz, in *The Way We Never Were*, details the mythology of families in American history and argues that the typical nuclear family –with breadwinner dad and stay-at-home mom – was never really the majority.<sup>116</sup> Hidden behind the façade of suburban conformity, many families faced problems that only later would be discussed, such as alcoholism, drug-abuse, depression, anxiety, and boredom. Historians have also shown that even in the midst of fifties' domestic ideology, the number of working mothers continued to rise. "Although the campaign affirming the delights of home and family was aimed at mother-housewives, this was precisely the group seeking employment. The trend was so pronounced that by the end of the decade the 'typical' woman worker was a middle-aged, middle class wife and mother."<sup>117</sup> The 1950s was truly a decade of tension and contradiction for the American family. For women who

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<sup>115</sup> Weiss, *To Have and To Hold*, 1.

<sup>116</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

<sup>117</sup> Maxine L. Margolis, *Mothers and Such: Views of American Women and Why They Changed* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 218.

married in the post-World War II era and became the mothers of the baby boom generation, these contradictions and tensions had an effect on the way they raised their children, especially their daughters. One daughter remembers that, "...underneath it all, for us little girls watching in our pajamas, there were pointed lessons, a palpable feeling of unassuageable longings, male and female. Everybody seemed to want something more but nobody seemed to know what it was."<sup>118</sup> Girls who spent their childhoods in this decade of simmering anxiety absorbed the swirling emotions and translated the messages into real possibilities for change in early adulthood.

What kinds of mothers did baby boomers have? One baby boomer, Carol Lynn, explained how sober her own parents were: "I never learned to be affectionate... My mother and father tried their best to make a good family... They planned well and gave us everything their means and skills allowed... I knew that my parents loved me. But I never *felt* that my parents loved me. And I never heard the words [I love you]."<sup>119</sup> In many fifties' families, parents avoided overly-demonstrative behavior toward their children and maintained a patriarchal hierarchy within the family unit. Spanking and physical discipline were commonplace, despite Dr. Spock's advice to indulge children's desires. In *Raising Baby by the Book*, Julia Grant explains how advice of the forties and fifties tended to stress "that mothering should be easy, pleasurable, and fun,"<sup>120</sup> a goal that likely appealed to this cohort of young mothers who were married on average at the age of 20, with their first child arriving within the first year of marriage<sup>121</sup>. Grant's analysis of

<sup>118</sup> Anne Taylor Fleming, *Motherhood Deferred: A Woman's Journey* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), 53.

<sup>119</sup> Carol Lynn Pearson, *One on the Seesaw: The Ups and Downs of a Single-Parent Family* (New York: Random House, 1988), 44-45.

<sup>120</sup> Julia Grant, *Raising Baby by the Book: The Education of American Mothers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 209.

<sup>121</sup> Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable*, 50.

expert advice from the fifties reveals that “for the most part [mothers] accepted that children should receive large doses of love and affection and experience a minimum of frustration and tension.”<sup>122</sup> These basic rules for successful parenting found their way into mainstream guides for most white middle class mothers. As late as 1965, many mothers also had a real sense that if they provided the appropriate environment and material goods, then they would have a successful child. In Eve Featheringill’s guide *How to be a Successful Mother*, she placed a great emphasis on having proper spacing between children and keeping a well-organized household. Being a good mother also meant being a good housewife.<sup>123</sup>

Some explanations for the changes in mothering practices between parents of the baby boom and their children focus on the overwhelming shifts in social and economic factors. During this time period, society reacted to the beginning of détente and a lessening of fear about the Cold War by relaxing much of the conformism associated with anti-communism. In addition, the growing popularity of feminist ideology and the widespread use of oral contraception (“the pill”) challenged assumptions about motherhood and femininity, allowing for greater freedom of choice for women’s reproduction. These social conditions intersected with shifts in the economy in the late sixties and seventies which brought about an increase in demand for female workers in service and clerical industries, providing opportunities for work outside the home for both single and married mothers. These economic and political factors surely helped create an ideal situation for a shift away from post-war style mothering. But there were also

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>123</sup> Eve Featheringill, *How to be a Successful Mother* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1965), 96-97. Sallie Bingham Women’s Collection, Duke University.

personal factors shaping women's ideology about motherhood. Individual women often based their assumptions about proper mothering on how their own mother performed. One sociologist explained that mothers "seek information on children's needs, they attempt to meet those needs through their child-rearing practices, they believe that there is continuing progress in knowledge regarding child rearing, and they regularly reflect on their own childhoods, attempting to repeat what they felt was right and to avoid the mistakes their parents (especially their mothers) made in raising them."<sup>124</sup> Baby boom daughters overwhelmingly rejected the kind of parenting they experienced as children. As the authors of *Mother-Daughter Revolution* note, "From mother to daughter, in the last few generations, mother blaming has become particularly rampant within the middle and upper classes."<sup>125</sup> One baby boomer explained, "I have searched my way into motherhood...[and] what is difficult is that I've seen what my own mother did, it was somehow preposterous...So what would be the form, what would new motherhood be like?"<sup>126</sup>

Historians have documented the malaise many middle class fifties' mothers felt, trapped in a rigidly gendered world. The incidence of depression, anxiety and anger that afflicted many baby boomers' mothers caused some of their children to have unhappy childhoods. Many of the daughters grew up determined to give their own children a happier experience. One young woman, Valerie, said that she "specifically wanted a girl...because I wanted to give that girl things that I felt I hadn't had."<sup>127</sup> Others

<sup>124</sup> Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 155.

<sup>125</sup> Elizabeth Debold, Marie Wilson, and Idelisse Malave, *Mother Daughter Revolution: From Betrayal to Power* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1993), 23.

<sup>126</sup> Tuula Gordon, *Feminist Mothers* (London: Macmillan Education LTD, 1990), 63.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

remembered their mothers' unhappiness and detachment from them and, in turn, overcompensated by becoming too involved with their own children. One such mother, Michelle, explained in her memoir how lonely she felt due to her mother's illness. She remembered that, "My mother never eavesdropped on me and my best friend. She couldn't have; she was too depressed... my mother spent her days – in bed, 'resting' with her eyes open (which I knew because despite strict orders to leave her alone, I was always sneaking in, trying to talk to her or hold her hand, or else just sitting on the edge of the bed watching her)."<sup>128</sup> Michelle ended up causing her own daughter emotional trauma by being with her constantly – eventually leading to anxiety and the need for intensive therapy. To her, being a good mother meant making sure her child was never lonely. This sort of overprotection and attentiveness described many mothers in the fifties who lived vicariously through their children.

The media, experts, and women's husbands expected them to find fulfillment in homemaking and childrearing and, for many mothers, their children became their worlds. This placed unrealistic expectations on the children and some baby boomers ended up feeling angry that their mothers martyred themselves in the name of the family. In a letter to her own mother, single mother and baby boomer Beverly Slapin asked: "How much worrying caused you to lose the sense of yourself as a person? When did you get used up from putting yourself last? Did it happen suddenly, or was it a slow burn? Did you ever have any dreams for yourself, or just dreams for your children? What caused you to live your life through us, so that nothing we ever did was good enough and none of our struggles were ever worth supporting? And when I got pregnant, why was it your shame

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<sup>128</sup> Michelle Herman, *The Middle of Everything: Memoirs of Motherhood* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 28.



when it wasn't mine?"<sup>129</sup> Another daughter, Sarah, shared Beverly's point of view that focusing on their children's lives created unhappiness and tension between mothers and their children. She recounted that her mother, "ha[d] some regrets that she didn't do something more 'serious' or 'substantial' [with her life]. I think she [saw] her life lived largely through the success of her children, and in a lot of ways all three of us have disappointed her, which is a source of sadness for me and also for her."<sup>130</sup> Daughters of unhappy mothers took personal happiness and individual health seriously and incorporated it into their new philosophy of motherhood.

The Generation Gap also played a part in steering baby boom daughters away from the June Cleaver model of motherhood. Both men and women of the baby boom distrusted the older generation. A study by Dr. Quinn Mills entitled *Not Like Our Parents* argues that the baby boom generation, those born roughly between 1946 and 1964, had a "special quality" and a markedly different worldview from the previous generation. They were somehow more optimistic, tolerant, and innovative.<sup>131</sup> Anthropologist Margaret Mead makes a compelling case for the Generation Gap and explains its importance in world history in *Culture and Commitment*. The world changed so much after World War II, Mead argues, that children born after the war grew up in an entirely new and uncharted time. "In the 1960s young people, the first young people of the new generation, believed they could make the world new overnight."<sup>132</sup> They blamed their

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<sup>129</sup> Beverly Slapin, *The Magic Washing Machine: A Diary of Single Motherhood* (Mesquite, Texas: Ide House, Inc., 1983), 71.

<sup>130</sup> Julie Kettle Gundlach, *My Mother Before Me* (Secuacus, New Jersey: Lyle Stuart, Inc., 1986), 215.

<sup>131</sup> Dr. Quinn Mills, *Not Like Our Parents: How the Baby Boom Generation is Changing America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987).

<sup>132</sup> Margaret Mead, *Culture and Commitment: The New Relationships Between the Generations in the 1970s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 95.

parents' generation for many of the problems the world faced. In an era of civil rights protests and calls for social justice and reform, baby boomers embraced the idea that they could create new rules for most social institutions.

Parenting, and motherhood in particular, came under debate in the 1970s and baby boomers chose to reexamine the strict gender guidelines of their parents' generation. Journalist Anne Taylor Fleming called her cohort the "Sacrificial Generation of Women, a phrase I had used in one of my very first magazine articles about the daunting array of choices we then saucy young women faced in the early 1970s as the world order, the gender order, was changing... We were the in-betweeners, the Girls of the Chasm, raised in the old world, expected to flourish in the new."<sup>133</sup> This Sacrificial Generation forged new paths of womanhood: women like Fleming deferred motherhood indefinitely and pursued careers, while others, like the founders of MOMMA: the organization for single mothers Karol Hope and Nancy Connolly, found strength in their status as mothers and sought ways to combine motherhood and careers. Author Beppie Harrison wrote about the challenges inherent in redefining social institutions and how, "Our generation is working out how to parent at a time when the whole question of what roles women and men should take in the wider society is being vigorously debated. At least our parents had a less controversial notion of what they expected of each other."<sup>134</sup>

While there seemed to be a distinct Generation Gap between baby boomers and their mothers, there were also differences within the later generation that affected the kind of experience they had as parents in general and, especially, in becoming single mothers.

<sup>133</sup> Taylor, *Motherhood Deferred*, 32.

<sup>134</sup> Beppie Harrison, *The Shock of Motherhood: The Unexpected Challenge for the New Generation of Mothers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1986), 58.

Conditions were favorable for early baby boomers who chose to become single mothers. In *From Marriage to the Market*, sociologist Susan Thistle notes that “early baby boomers fared markedly better than their mothers’ generation when raising children on their own, despite the rise in rates of divorce and never-married motherhood.”<sup>135</sup> They entered the wage labor force during relative prosperity, with an overall higher level of education, and during the beginning of efforts to decrease sex and race discrimination in the workplace. Because the baby boom lasted almost two decades, however, different cohorts faced challenges at different times and under changing social and economic conditions. Thistle arranges the cohorts as: A) mothers of early baby boomers - those women who began families in first decade after World War II, B) the *war generation* - children born during the war, C) *early baby boomers* - children born in first decade after the war, D) *late baby boomers* - children born in second decade after the war, and E) *bust* - children born in the late sixties and seventies.<sup>136</sup> The political, social, and economic landscapes shifted markedly from the late sixties through the eighties and as each cohort came of age, they faced new challenges and opportunities that shaped their experiences as single mothers. By the 1980s, single mothers faced less favorable prospects than earlier cohorts. Despite facing increases in poverty among female-headed-households and high divorce rates, baby boomers as a whole did not revert back to their parents’ ways of thinking about marriage and motherhood.

In order to redefine motherhood, the first step baby boomers took was to reject traditional, narrowly defined notions of womanhood. To many daughters, this meant

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<sup>135</sup> Susan Thistle, *From Marriage to the Market: The Transformation of Women’s Lives and Work* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006, 93.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

rejecting the experiences of their own mothers. Journalist Ann Crittenden reveals that, “To many, especially young women who, above all, hoped to escape the fate of their own mothers, motherhood seemed to be the ultimate trap.”<sup>137</sup> Some young women rejected motherhood altogether, choosing to remain single and/or childless. As Landon Y. Jones describes in *Great Expectations*, baby boom women “did not want to be baby machines. Their own mothers, by God, had warned them about the mother trap. They had told their children how smart they were, how independent they were, how much better they were. They could have chosen motherhood, all right, but they had a higher obligation to themselves to be free.”<sup>138</sup> This call for freedom and casting off of the shackles of motherhood was echoed not only in mothers’ advice to their daughters, but also played out on a national level. The first President’s Commission on the Status of Women urged in 1963 “that ‘imaginative counseling’ for girls be available to ‘lift [their] aspirations beyond stubbornly persistent assumptions about ‘women’s roles’ and ‘women’s interests,’ and [to] result in choices that have inner authenticity for their makers.”<sup>139</sup> The message from the top down encouraged girls to take themselves seriously as independent individuals.

Those young women who decided to include marriage and motherhood in their life plans sought to change to *automatic* nature of motherhood. Since their own mothers and grandmothers seemed to marry and have families out of necessity and expectation, baby boom daughters theorized that they could be better mothers if they controlled when and how they started their families. Harrison reported that “Even having children is no longer

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<sup>137</sup> Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World is Still the Least Valued* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001), 49.

<sup>138</sup> Landon Y. Jones, *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation* (NY: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1980), 201.

<sup>139</sup> Judith Hole and Ellen Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism* (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1971), 23-24.

necessarily what everyone does; more women are postponing having children to do other things, so that when they do have babies, they are intensely aware of having made an enormous decision.”<sup>140</sup> The younger generation of women wanted a sense of control around their life choices. Daughters saw the disappointment their mothers felt by giving up personal life goals and refused to let the same fate befall them. One such daughter, Kristin, explained, “I’m twenty years old. I’m not going to get stuck in the same rut my mother and my aunts and everybody else I know is in. She [her mother] never did anything with her life. She was supposed to be a journalist. Now she’s fat and forty-five. There’s really no future for her.”<sup>141</sup> By sharing her disappointment about not pursuing a career in journalism, Kristin’s mother alerted her daughter that the idealization of motherhood caused her great personal loss.

Part of the reason that many of these young women had aspirations beyond what their mothers experienced was due to the way they were raised. For the middle class, at least, “Mothers of baby boomers contributed to social change early on by shaping their daughters’ life plans.” Historian Jessica Weiss argued that, “They consciously groomed their daughters to make choices different from those they themselves had made. They hoped their daughters would marry at later ages and form equitable partnerships when they did wed...When the female baby boomers delayed marriage, it was not just that they were rejecting the choices of their mothers, as so many historians have asserted, but they also acted out new life plans that their mothers fostered.”<sup>142</sup> The mothers of the baby boom laid the foundation for future change. For example:

<sup>140</sup> Harrison, *Shock of Motherhood*, 77.

<sup>141</sup> Hope and Young, *Momma: The Sourcebook*, 36-37.

<sup>142</sup> Weiss, *To Have and To Hold*, 206-207.

Of women interviewed during the late 1950s and 1960s, even those who were content with their marriages almost always wanted a different life for their daughters. When it came to her daughter, one woman told interviewers in 1957, “I sure don’t want her to turn out to be just a housewife like myself.” Another explained to the researchers in 1958 that she hoped her daughters would “be more independent than I was.” A third, interviewed in 1959, said nearly the same thing: “I want them to have some goal in life besides being a housewife. I’d like to see them make a living so the house isn’t the end of all things.”<sup>143</sup>

In an effort to make these goals a reality, mothers often had to insist on breaking with family traditions and gendered social norms. Girls had to be given the skills necessary to succeed in their new endeavors. Many mothers insisted on providing their daughters with a college education. For instance, Rose Danielli of East Flatbush told a reporter in 1973, “Why, back when the kids were in grade school, I told my husband, ‘Joe, if one of our kids is going to college, all of them are going. Your girls aren’t gonna have 10 children like your mama – they’ve gotta do something with their lives just like our boy.’”<sup>144</sup> Danielli was successful in convincing her husband to provide their daughters with educational opportunities and encouraged them to have lives different from her own.

Sometimes this conscious encouragement backfired, though. Teenagers could be rebellious and in some cases they purposefully did the opposite of what their parents told them. One baby boomer, Kristin, lamented her bull-headed ways. She said, “When my mother disapproved of my husband (she didn’t want me to get married), I said, ‘The hell with you, I’m getting married anyway.’ I never would have done that if she had said, ‘Why

<sup>143</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History*, 251.

<sup>144</sup> Susan Jacoby, “They’ve Discovered Feminism in East Flatbush!” *Chicago Tribune* June 28, 1973.

don't you wait? He's a nice boy.' or something like that. I would have said, 'Good-bye Manny.' The more she disapproves, the more I do it."<sup>145</sup> Kristin's marriage ended in an early divorce and led to her becoming a single mother. Another daughter, Roseanne, also learned the hard way. She said, "My mother tried to persuade me to wait to get married, but not with any pressure. I was too young, but, of course, when you're twenty, you think you know everything. As you find out later, you don't!"<sup>146</sup> Roseanne's sister, Linda, felt that their mother encouraged her independence. Linda went to college and then married and divorced a man her mother disliked. Linda said that their mother, "Expresses what seems to be a regret that she set me so free."<sup>147</sup> Many mothers of baby boomers raised their daughters with mixed messages, a reflection of the times in which they lived. They promoted traditional gender values of motherhood, while at the same time encouraged girls to pursue individual goals such as college or careers. One daughter explained, "As the oldest daughter, I was the elected bearer of simultaneous and contradictory responsibilities: first, to emulate my mother and so vindicate the choices she had in fact made; second, to oppose her and so realize the choices she might have made if she had been given the chance."<sup>148</sup>

Of course, not all mothers of the baby boom were unhappy. There were many who were quite content with their lives, who coped well despite averted goals or dreams. Essy Zimmerman told how she gave up her dreams of law school: "At Oberlin, I studied political science. I was going to be a lawyer, but it was Depression times and there were

<sup>145</sup> Hope and Young, *Momma: The Sourcebook*, 37.

<sup>146</sup> Gundlach, *My Mother Before Me*, 161.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>148</sup> Molly Hite, "Mother Underground," in *Mother Journeys: Feminists Write About Mothering*, ed. Maureen T. Reddy et al. (Minneapolis: Spinsters Ink, 1994), 282.

eight of us children. Besides, by that time, Paul and I planned to be married. It wasn't realistic for me to be a doctor's wife and a law student. I made the choice without a moment's hesitation and don't regret it at all."<sup>149</sup> Essy's daughter agreed that her mother "never felt trapped or restricted" with her life as a mother and wife.<sup>150</sup> Someone like Essy must have been frustrated during the post-war era as the cult of marriage and motherhood limited girls' ambitions so greatly. She did not allow her daughter to give in to these external pressures, though. Like the 'unhappy' baby boom mothers, Essy tried to persuade her daughter to think of herself as a whole person, not just a wife or mother. Her daughter gave in to her mother's demands and told how, "Even in high school, my ambition was to have kids. Then it came time for college. I went to college mostly because I felt my mom wouldn't be happy if I got married too early."<sup>151</sup>

Class played an important role in shaping ambitions and expectations of baby boomers. Even though the middle classes expanded greatly during the post-war years, socio-economic status greatly affected parenting styles and mother-daughter relationships. For daughters of the working class, economic hardships, abuse, religious beliefs and substance abuse may have affected the kinds of options their mothers felt free to encourage. Sociologist Lillian Rubin studied working-class families in the mid-1970s and noted the mothers' reluctance to point their daughters into the workforce or higher education. In these working-class homes, a family achieved higher social status when the father could enough to afford to keep the mother at home. Because this was often difficult, many of the mothers interviewed by Rubin worked outside the home in tiring

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<sup>149</sup> Gundlach, *My Mother Before Me*, 183.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.



jobs for little pay. This work was in addition to their traditional duties as housewife and mother. Working-class mothers advised their baby boom daughters to marry well and hope for a comfortable life, one in which they would have the luxury of being a full-time mother. As one mother described, it was important to find a husband who could provide because, "I felt like I was a charity ward case or something... he'd [her husband] get mad because he didn't always have the money for the things I needed, and he'd get mad because he felt bad about that. But how was I supposed to know that then? I was only a kid myself, and I was stuck with a bawling baby, and not enough money, and having to depend on a husband who didn't even work all the time."<sup>152</sup> In addition, these families often could not afford to help their daughters go to college, so it was not an option the mothers felt comfortable suggesting. This effectively eliminated the one major avenue that could have resulted in providing their daughters with alternative lifestyle choices.<sup>153</sup> Other poor families recognized that higher education could bring economic opportunities for their children and sent their offspring to colleges and universities, but not without anxiety. One mother, Norah Kirk, experienced a deep sense of sadness when her children went off to university, despite knowing that it could lead to an improvement in their lives. This was what one interviewer called "the predicament of working-class mothers who have watched their children vanish into an unknown world."<sup>154</sup>

Class also impacted decisions women made if they decided to divorce and become single mothers. Much of the testimony of middle-class women indicated that divorce and single motherhood carried a great stigma and, in some cases, families shunned their

<sup>152</sup> Lillian B. Rubin, *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 81.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Jean McCrindle and Sheila Rowbotham, ed., *Dutiful Daughters: Women Talk about Their Lives* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1977), 7.

daughters for divorcing their husbands, even in cases of abuse. Middle class women were also more likely to try and support themselves than turn to family for help than working-class women. These mothers fell into poverty in the '60s and '70s, causing a swell in the welfare rolls, in part due to the non-support of children by their fathers.<sup>155</sup> The working classes, on the other hand, absorbed single mothers much more easily into their communities. Even if monetary assistance was not available, parents often let their daughters and grandchildren move back in with them and proved invaluable as child-minders when the daughters found work. One daughter, Doreen, told how her family was shocked at the breakup of her marriage. She explained that her mother "has a sacrosanct attitude towards marriage. So the whole divorce and separation bit was a terrible thing to her. She was brought up, I suppose, to endure." But Doreen's family did not turn their backs on Doreen and her children. She admitted that, "I couldn't manage without my family. Social Security isn't bad, what I get, but I just couldn't do everything on it. I went on holiday last year. My family paid for it. Things like that. My family are always sending over... treats the kids to this, and so on."<sup>156</sup> The neighborhood at large also provided relief for single mothers that seemed lacking in middle-class suburbs. In one example, single mother Ann said, "There was always someone willing to have the children, even if it was only while I went to the shops, and things like that. It helped an awful lot."<sup>157</sup> Despite problems with jobs, money, crime, and abuse typical in many of the working-class stories of divorce, these baby boom daughters seemed to have less conflict with their mothers over ending bad marriages and becoming single mothers.

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<sup>155</sup> O'Connor, "The FAP Fizzle," 2.

<sup>156</sup> Catherine Itzin, *Splitting Up: Single Parent Liberation* (London: Virago, 1980), 130.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

In some cases, middle-class daughters who chose single motherhood or divorce risked their relationships with their mothers. “I do feel I’ve let her [my mother] down; she would like to see me married and financially secure. She will shake her head and wonder how I could be her daughter,” Sarah said. “I don’t think she holds it against me that I’m divorced, but I think she wonders: ‘Don’t you ever wonder what’s happening with Ian?’ She liked my ex-husband a lot, and it is a little bit of a chiding.”<sup>158</sup> Single mother Susan, however, was not as lucky. She described the result of her messy divorce from an alcoholic husband: “You see, my mother disowned me. My mother has talked to me four times since I’ve been separated... oh, yes, it’s true! She’s lost her grandchildren and she doesn’t want to have anything to do with her daughter... her daughter is a fallen woman, she’s going straight to hell, according to my mother. Catholicism is really deeply embedded in my family... Divorce is not allowed.”<sup>159</sup> Even as adults, daughters felt pressure from their families to get married and stay married, regardless of the quality of their marriage. Although feminists fought hard in the seventies to lessen the stigma attached to divorce and single motherhood, it was felt keenly by baby boom daughters and played a critical role in shaping intergenerational relationships. Another single mother, Karen, told how she “married Hank twice. He’s the father of my kids and I think that has something to do with the fact that I married him the second time. My folks were pushing it so hard. They’d like to push us back together right now.”<sup>160</sup> In situations where daughters moved back in with parents after divorce, friction occurred. Instead of trying to survive on welfare or a low-paying job, many middle-class single mothers recognized the

<sup>158</sup> Gundlach, *My Mother Before Me*, 217-219.

<sup>159</sup> Hope and Young, *Momma: The Sourcebook*, 112.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-118.

increased earning power a college education would bring them and accepted their parents' support in order to meet that goal. Karen explained that, "I live here because without [my] folks' help it would be really hard to go to college. I'm living with them and they take care of my kids."<sup>161</sup> But Karen felt that her mother tried to undermine her authority with her children and that there was tension in the house between the generations. Middle- and upper-class parents sometimes used money as a way to control their daughter's behavior. One baby boomer, Jessica, was dating a man of whom her parents disapproved. In an effort to break up the relationship, Jessica's mother sent veiled threats about cutting off financial help. She wrote, "If you are pleased to accept his [her father's] material gifts, then you must respect his moral standards and principles and try to make him happy in return."<sup>162</sup> Jessica refused her parents' monetary gifts and continued to date her unacceptable boyfriend.

Where the 1950s celebrated conformity and uniformity, the 1970s was a decade of choice. Baby boomers took advantage of this time of possibility to redefine motherhood by separating it from the nuclear family and housewifery. Not only did they reinterpret what it meant to be a good mother by shifting focus away from housekeeping and onto the mother-child relationship, but they also renegotiated how the husband-wife relationship connected to father- and motherhood. As we saw earlier, girls who witnessed their own mother's unhappy marriage were more likely to end unhappy marriages, postpone marriage, or reject it altogether. One psychological study explained that, "Girls glean women's reality in the world bit by bit as they watch their mothers maneuver through the daily politics of family life... If a mother adheres to the romantic fallacy that a woman

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>162</sup> Payne, *Between Ourselves*, 27.

is nothing without a man and places relationship with a man at the center of her life, depriving herself of her own importance, her daughter will know.”<sup>163</sup> In some cases, girls witnessed their mothers’ victimization due to the times in which they lived. Wife-beating was not considered a crime in the first decades after World War II and women often stayed in abusive relationships because it was expected. For instance, historian Stephanie Coontz recounts the story of a woman who sustained decades of abuse and only divorced in the late 1960s, in *Marriage: A History*.<sup>164</sup> Witnessing both the long-term abuse and subsequent divorce, daughters of these turbulent relationships came of age at a time of awareness about spousal abuse and rape and had more support systems in place to help them escape. Additionally, girls learned from their mothers’ actions. One single mom said, “Now, my father died when I was ten, so I was raised by a single mom, for the most part. That’s another reason why it didn’t seem like it would be that great [a risk to live alone]...”<sup>165</sup> Those baby boom daughters who had positive experiences in single-mother households had alternative choices available to them to redefine “normal” family life. This helped to maintain the importance of motherhood for women while minimizing the necessity of marriage. In one short story about single mothering, the heroine revealed to her own mother, who was happily divorced, that she was pregnant though unmarried. The heroine recounted, “But she was delighted about my pregnancy.

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<sup>163</sup> Elizabeth Debold, Marie Wilson and Idelisse Malave, *Mother Daughter Revolution: From Betrayal to Power* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1993), 227.

<sup>164</sup> Coontz, *Marriage*, 241.

<sup>165</sup> Wendy Ann Paterson, *Unbroken Homes: Single-Parent Mothers Tell Their Stories* (New York: The Haworth Press, 2001), 218.

She told me that motherhood was far better than wifehood and that I had chosen the right half of the equation to balance my budget on.”<sup>166</sup>

The move away from the institution of marriage did not end women’s desires to be good mothers or to become mothers if they were childless. Throughout the seventies, the growing ranks of single mothers worked to challenge assumptions that placed the traditional heterosexual nuclear family as the norm. Divorced mothers began to see single motherhood as a legitimate lifestyle choice and not simply a phase in between marriages (although many single mothers remarried). Divorcee Johanne reported in 1972 that “marriage doesn’t matter anymore. ‘Yes, I’m single and a mother (Molly is 6). But I’m not looking for a man. The issue is not whether I get remarried but how I live when I’m not married.”<sup>167</sup> Divorced mother Karol Hope echoed these thoughts when she said, “I am a single mother now. I want a better life now... I refuse to conduct my life as a stage between marriages.”<sup>168</sup> The convergence of ideas which had been taking shape since the fifties about marriage, motherhood, and womanhood created the opportunity in the seventies for women to legitimize female-headed households. Widows, divorced women, and unwed mothers worked against serious challenges in order to make this new ideology into reality. Single mothers faced housing discrimination, problems obtaining credit in their own names, employment discrimination, lack of child care, and social stigma. However, this new urge to abandon marriage while continuing motherhood continued to rise. In fact, a new category of mother appeared: single mother by choice. As early as 1972, journalists reported that an increasing number of women were adopting children

<sup>166</sup>Julia Whitty, “The Daguerreotype” in *Mothers: Twenty Stories of Contemporary Motherhood* edited by Katrina Kenison and Kathleen Hirsch (New York: North Point Press, 1996) 261.

<sup>167</sup> Lanie Jones, “New Pride in Being a Single Mother” *Los Angeles Times* (March 23, 1972).

<sup>168</sup> Betty Liddick, “Mommas Launch Publication” *Los Angeles Times* (Nov. 29, 1972).

alone as well as planning pregnancies outside of marriage. One reporter balked, "Adopting a baby is one thing, but never having married and deciding to have a baby, literally planning a year in advance to become an unwed mother is another thing entirely. It's too early to tell how many of them there are, but a new breed of single mothers is doing just that."<sup>169</sup> This may not have been what their mothers had in mind when encouraging a break with tradition and fostering life outside of the home, but baby boomers invented new ways of fulfilling their dreams of motherhood at a time when marriage seemed less than desirable.

The women's liberation movement was a place where baby boomers could find support for alternative lifestyle choices and it was also where mothers and daughters could come together and share mutual goals and desires for change. In *Feminist Promises*, historian Christine Stansell perpetuates the myth that the generation gap between older and younger feminists caused a rift in the movement and she fails to acknowledge the bond between mothers and daughters, both the blood bond between family members and the psychological bond between feminist foremothers and liberation daughters.<sup>170</sup> The chasm between the generations was not as great as Stansell's analysis implies. Despite the animosity baby boomers sometimes directed toward their mothers' generation, the two sides needed one another in order to grow. As one media scholar argues:

For the first time, the relationship between mother and daughter is placed within a social context that acknowledges the often painful reality of the "prefeminist" mother, that

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Christine Stansell, *The Feminist Promise: 1792 to the Present* (New York: Modern Library, 2010).

relieves her of some of the overwhelming responsibility for her daughter's psyche in the name of a more realistic appraisal of mother's life options and limitations.

This is not to say that the seventies were without their mother-blaming moments. Indeed, one of the unique aspects of women's magazines is the existence, side by side, of contradictory discourses about women in general and mothers and daughters in particular. Even such a conscientious writer as Signe Hammer, although careful to point out "both sides" of the mother/daughter "problem," still holds to the theme of inevitable struggle when she claims, "Some conflict between the generations is inevitable, and hostility between mothers and daughters can be a sign of health, a sign that a daughter is developing normally." Nevertheless, this author does not resort to the more typical urgings to mothers to "let go." Rather, she speaks in the new voice of female independence, urging both mother and daughter to find their own identities and come to a new mutuality.<sup>171</sup>

Both mothers and daughters benefitted from changes brought about by women's liberation and, in spite of difficulties during the growing process, both generations of women eventually found more common ground between them. When viewed through the lens of single motherhood, Stansell's claim of rifts between generations falls apart. Older women made up a significant proportion of divorced single mothers early in the seventies as unhappy fifties' wives finally found the courage to dissolve broken marriages. These single mothers found solidarity with the younger cohort of feminists, who were often more militant and vocal. The feminist movement provided a great deal of rhetorical and practical support for single mothers. Although early in the women's liberation movement,

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<sup>171</sup> Suzzanna Walters, *Lives Together, Worlds Apart: Mothers and Daughters in Popular Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 120.



radical feminists, like Ti-Grace Atkinson and Shulamith Firestone, identified motherhood as a key condition in the oppression of women and condemned it in their writing, by the mid-1970s, cultural feminists began to see motherhood as a source of women's collective and individual power. Historian Lauri Umansky explained how, "Both the women's health movement and black feminist activists had already begun to place motherhood at the center of feminist concern and to invest it with supposed powers beyond actual procreativity."<sup>172</sup> When Jane Alpert published "Mother Right" and Adrienne Rich wrote "Of Woman Born," both treatises arguing that women's power lay in their ability to procreate, feminist mothers were given new tools with which to redefine their roles. Single mothers, in particular, found strength and freedom in the rhetoric which centered power in the act of mothering. Single motherhood seemed the common-sense culmination of the messages about marriage and motherhood coming out of the feminist movement: boiled down to their simplest forms, single mothers could easily interpret that marriage was unnecessary (even bad for them) and motherhood was good (even the ultimate source of power). Single mothers also used tools from the women's liberation movement, like consciousness-raising sessions and publication of underground newsletters, to build communities of single mothers. Grass-roots organizations spread quickly throughout the early 1970s with campaigns to help single mothers, and in many cases single fathers, be successful outside of marriage.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Lauri Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacy of the Sixties* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 113.

<sup>173</sup> While Parents Without Partners, a support group for single parents, had been in existence since 1957, it seemed to cater to an older generation and tended to be more conservative, continuing to place a great value on the heterosexual traditional family norm.

The case of Anita is interesting because it combines a number of the reasons for a shift toward single parenting by baby boom daughters and incorporates a new feminist consciousness in both the decision to become a single parent and how she wanted to raise her own daughter. On the surface, Anita's family situation was unusual for the 1960s. Her parents divorced when she was eleven and her mother never remarried, instead raising three children on her own by working for the New York City police department. But in many ways, Anita's mother was like so many of the other mothers we've seen so far. Anita described her mother as having "an attitude that we were the children, and she was the parent who mandates and dictates."<sup>174</sup> Her mother's success at single parenthood did not inspire her to become a single mother herself, but, when faced with a failing marriage, Anita had the example of her own family to help her decide to abandon her unhappy situation. In the mid-seventies, when Anita became pregnant with her only child, she had to make the difficult decision of ending her marriage in order to make herself happy. She explained that, "My getting pregnant made some realities come into effect very quickly. My husband didn't want to have a child, and there was just no way I wasn't going to have one. I was moving in one direction: into myself. It was the first time in our relationship that I had something that was absolutely mine. Before that, he did all the great things with me at his side."<sup>175</sup> Anita may have followed in her mother's footsteps of single motherhood, but she consciously chose to be a different kind of mother to her daughter Leila. Where her mother never communicated with her, Anita and her daughter had a close bond. Anita saw her daughter as a motivation to do and be more, where her mother remained content in her "mother role." Echoing the messages of the

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<sup>174</sup> Gundlach, 254.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 255.

women's liberation movement, Anita explained how, "My pursuits [her studies] show Leila what the possibilities are... I would like to see Leila, who's very smart and naturally talented, think her own thoughts and follow her spirit."<sup>176</sup>

In the 1970s, choosing or embracing single motherhood as an authentic lifestyle choice was a culmination of the emerging ideologies about wifehood, motherhood, and womanhood. Daughters who reacted to their mothers' advice to choose a life different from their own began to accept the difficulties and challenge the stigma associated with single-parent families. Women who became single mothers found communities forming to ease their transitions into single motherhood, across the U.S.A. as well as in other western industrialized countries, like the U.K. and Australia. One group formed in Los Angeles, California in 1971 called MOMMA: the organization for single mothers created a newspaper/magazine, also called MOMMA, in which they published information helpful to single parent families. One article highlighted how single mothers put themselves out on a limb in the quest to reinvent the family:

I left my marriage because it was dishonest, him and me. I left my jobs because they were unreal, dictated by rules that overlooked a fundamental part of the function of me... I left much, just about everything, it seems, that my culture insists is imperative to successful womanhood, motherhood... And I'm all I've got!<sup>177</sup>

This single mother challenged marriage and work because the institutions were "dishonest". She was unwilling to remain unhappily married for the sake of the nuclear family. She left her jobs because the sexism of the job market was unfair and her employers did not appreciate or accommodate her domestic responsibilities. She

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>177</sup> Karol Hope, "Taking Care of Ourselves," in *Momma: the newspaper/magazine for single mothers*. vol. 1, no. 4, (March 1973), 4.

understood that she was challenging the cultural definitions of womanhood and motherhood and that her existence outside of those boundaries helped to question their legitimacy. One major goal of most single mothers groups was to “normalize” divorce and single parent families, an important step in the process of change. By the 1980s, many of the baby boom daughters who took their mothers advice and postponed (or rejected) marriage, found themselves needing to create new choices about family and reproduction, including alternative family structures, single-headed households, and becoming single mothers by choice.

In the early 1980s, Betty Friedan explained in an interview how feminism had changed her generation’s views on motherhood and affected the messages they passed on to their baby boom daughters. She said, “My own feminism began in outrage at the either/or choice imposed on my generation. I was fired from my job as a reporter when I became pregnant. Most of us let ourselves be seduced into giving up our careers in order to embrace motherhood, and it wasn’t easy to resume them. We told our daughters that they could – and should – have it all.”<sup>178</sup> A revolution in ideology about gender, family, marriage, and motherhood occurred between baby boomers and their mothers. As a generation, many middle-class white baby boom daughters rejected the definitions of womanhood and motherhood their own mothers lived. A combination of economic, social, and intellectual factors offered baby boom daughters the opportunity to abandon the strict cultural roles about motherhood that effectively trapped their mothers during the fifties and early sixties. Importantly, though, baby boom daughters felt empowered to act on these opportunities because of the messages their mothers provided. Mothers of baby

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<sup>178</sup> Betty Friedan, “Liberating the Family: Friedan’s New Frontier” *Chicago Tribune* (Dec 2, 1979).

boomers who were dissatisfied with their own lives and marriages encouraged their daughters to postpone marriage and find fulfillment in careers and education. As baby boomer Catherine described, “My mother claimed that she brought me up to be ‘selfish’ and urged me to stay ignorant of domestic skills so that no man would expect me to be a traditional housewife-and-mother support system; she took it for granted that I would have a satisfying career of my own.”<sup>179</sup>

One unforeseen consequence of this challenge to the status quo was the rise of single motherhood among the baby boom generation. This new generation of women redefined motherhood, separating it from housewifery, and placed a new emphasis on personal happiness as a foundation of successful motherhood. They also increasingly chose to end unhappy marriages and face the challenges of single motherhood. As one single mother said, “I think I’ve got a great life, and I think I have had. I don’t have regrets. And I feel like that I’ve really done what I wanted to do, and I feel that my kids... seemed to have not only been okay but been strengthened by that.”<sup>180</sup>

As they laid the groundwork for future single motherhood, Baby Boomers’ mothers also sent messages to their daughters which made them more open to the ideas of women’s liberation. In addition, as these Baby Boom mothers aged, they also became disillusioned themselves, about marriage and domesticity. Many middle-aged housewives were part of the divorce explosion in the early 1970s which led to the single parents’ liberation movement. Women’s experiences in the post-war world, as mothers and daughters, helped create the feminist movement of the 1970s. Feminist rhetoric fills the pages of *MOMMA: the magazine/newspaper for single mothers*. Single mothers used

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<sup>179</sup> Payne, *Between Ourselves*, 43.

<sup>180</sup> Paterson, *Unbroken Homes*, p. 227.

messages of equality to argue for the social, legal, and economic changes they believed would greatest help single parent families.

In many ways, the story of MOMMA reflects a typical pattern with the feminist movement of the 1960s and '70s. Historians like Ruth Rosen, Sara Evans, and Susan Brownmiller have all given numerous examples of the rise and fall of early feminist groups. Typically, women joined together to relate to one another on a personal level. They shared life stories, understood that many of their personal experiences were related to larger social and institutional issues; and, click!, they moved into action to help create change. The women of MOMMA did this, too. They started a food co-op, shared housing, and established child care co-ops. They also started to gather a file of resources to share with the community on issues like welfare rights, babysitters and lawyers; what they called "survival information."<sup>181</sup> MOMMA also had growing pains similar to other early feminist groups. Members had personality clashes; they resented the authority of the leadership; the process of the group ranged from radical therapy to *Roberts Rules*, and they tried organizing as a collective with equality for all.

MOMMA was not a mainstream feminist group. Most of the factions making up the larger women's liberation movement generally ignored single mothers, unaware that such women existed, needed, or wanted help. In 1971, "Betty Freidan was asked whether the women's movement would like to help single mothers. Ms. Freidan replied with a question, 'Are there that many of them?' She paused. 'Can they read?'"<sup>182</sup> Unnoticed during their time, these women remained practically invisible in the historical record. They have shown up, when mentioned at all, as an aside, an example of "other" areas in which

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 380-1.

<sup>182</sup> Lanie Jones, "New Pride in Being a Single Mother," *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 1972.

feminists worked. The single mothers of MOMMA existed outside the movement, narrowly confined to what many might consider their own special interests.

As a group dedicated to issues surrounding motherhood, MOMMA brought together what seemed at the time distinctly separate feminist ideals. Early radicals pointed to motherhood as part of patriarchal oppression, older liberal feminists who were often past their childbearing years looked to employment to help liberate mothers, and African American and Hispanic feminists embraced motherhood as a form of feminine power. The single mothers of MOMMA incorporated many of these ideals simultaneously, arguing from their unique position that motherhood was both a form of power AND, as socially constructed, a position of oppression. They went even further than many liberal feminists in their calls for equal employment opportunities because of their status as sole breadwinner with dependent children. In addition, MOMMA's organizers complicated white, middle-class feminism. As divorcees and single mothers, they were often stigmatized. However, many of the women were college-educated and held the same values as other white women of their class. The history of the relationship between motherhood and feminism has been presented as polarized, where motherhood either defined womanhood or became incompatible with it. The reality is that there existed a wide variety of feminist groups interested in interpreting motherhood – some of them operated under extreme ideologies, but far more dealt with the complicated relationships in between. The women of MOMMA practiced an integrated and pragmatic version of feminism that attempted to identify and change social, political, and governmental institutions responsible for creating inequality for single mothers.

At the height of second wave feminism, women grappled with the issue of motherhood. Feminists identified motherhood as it was constructed in a patriarchal society, and the bearing and raising of children, as part of the oppression of women. As historian Lauri Umansky reports, “American feminist discourses have subjected the institution of motherhood and the practice of mothering to their most complex, nuanced, and multifocused analysis...The mother has been rejected at times, almost deified at others, but she has never been ignored by feminists.”<sup>183</sup> Shulamith Firestone and other radicals called for an end to child-bearing and sexual relations with men. An older cohort of feminists, like Betty Friedan, saw a combination of work outside the home coupled with motherhood as an ideal innovation. African American and Hispanic feminists embraced their roles as mothers, finding great power in the mothering role within their communities. Many women opposed to the women’s movement reacted with stronger defenses of the role of the full-time homemaker and mother, as Phyllis Schlafly advocated throughout the period. Without a consensus about the role of mothers within the feminist movement, many women’s groups failed to see the issues upon which they agreed. Betty Freidan “correctly observes in *The Second Stage* [that] many women both inside and outside the movement were alienated from what they saw as the feminist demand that they choose between their family and their individuality.”<sup>184</sup> This splintering within the liberation movement allowed for a more cohesive opposition to make strong gains in reestablishing traditional, conservative, patriarchal mores and legislation.

<sup>183</sup> Lauri Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 2-3.

<sup>184</sup> Margaret A. Simons, “Motherhood, Feminism, and Identity,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, Vol. 7, No. 5 (1984), p. 350.



In a 1992 reading of feminism and motherhood, Ann Snitow establishes a time-line describing the historical relationship between feminism and motherhood with three distinct periods. The first period ran from 1963 to 1974 and included what she calls *demon texts*: “books demonized, apologized for, endlessly quoted out of context... [that] dared to speak of ‘women alone, or women against men.’”<sup>185</sup> Snitow discusses how texts of this time period either ignored mothers altogether or questioned the taken-for-granted fact that womanhood had been equated with motherhood, insisting that they did not attack housewives.<sup>186</sup> The second period spanned from 1976 to 1979. It was characterized by a deeper exploration of motherhood by feminists who examined practical issues related to motherhood as well as its implications on society. The third period, 1980 to 1990, saw feminists re-embracing motherhood, determined to understand its effects on women. Unfortunately, the strong Reagan-era backlash against feminist-appropriated motherhood and the family, left the feminists’ return to the topic strangely skewed.

Snitow emphasized what she saw as feminism’s support of the role of mother for women, through all three periods, despite a great emphasis on women’s individuality, which favored childlessness and sexual freedom. In these stereotypes, motherhood chained women to the domestic sphere, placed them under male control, and caused them to lose freedom of movement and career opportunities. While it can be argued that single or childless women benefitted from changes wrought by the women’s liberation movement, equality under the law and more access to employment and education did not necessarily change the fundamental shape of social and political institutions. These changes simply allowed women into the existing structure. In effect, those women who

<sup>185</sup> Ann Snitow, “Feminism and Motherhood: An American Reading,” *Feminist Review*, No. 40 (Spring, 1992), 35.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

could compete in the male-oriented system benefitted. They were often childless and/or single. Activists did not succeed in affecting the changes necessary to alter the system to allow comparable opportunity for women with dependents. As one mothers' advocate of the 1970s explained, "Instead of elevating women's work as mothers, feminism classed motherhood along with housework and liberated women out of it."<sup>187</sup>

If we read the feminism of the early '70s as an era questioning motherhood, then the work of the women organizing MOMMA becomes even more important. Beginning publication late in 1972, MOMMA falls into Snitow's first stage of the time-line, that of the *demon texts*. In this stage of early radical denunciation of motherhood, philosopher Margaret Simons explains that "the militant, angry feminist attack on women's traditional role...certainly received much more press coverage than moderate feminism."<sup>188</sup> MOMMA complicates Snitow's timeline by showing that some early grassroots feminist organizations embraced motherhood, despite their lack of media attention, and challenged traditional social institutions and government agencies' views on single mothers. By 1976, when Snitow's timeline shows a turn toward a reevaluation of motherhood by feminists, MOMMA chapters had already spread nationwide and the newspaper/magazine had been in operation for several years. In fact, in 1974 MOMMA founders Karol Hope and Lisa Connolly "received an award for outstanding achievement from *Mademoiselle* magazine. They were among 11 national winners honored in New York."<sup>189</sup> MOMMA filled a gap in the larger feminist movement, a gap created by the

<sup>187</sup> Janice Mall, "Mother's Abdication of the Child-Rearing Role." *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 3, 1978.

<sup>188</sup> Margaret Simons, "Motherhood, Feminism, and Identity," *Women's Studies International Forum* Vol. 7, No. 5 (1984), 351.

<sup>189</sup> "Founders of MOMMA Feted by Magazine," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 5, 1974.

overwhelming focus on childless women's place in society. Philosopher Margaret Simons argued:

There have always been integrators who saw the relationship between activities such as work in a day care center, projects to combat violence against women, and legal efforts to end employment discrimination and secure health benefits for women. Integrative theory has also always existed that has supported the equality of women and their rights as individuals, while respecting mothers and fighting for their right to make motherhood a positive, enriching experience rather than an alienating one.<sup>190</sup>

MOMMA espoused an integrative feminism, calling for practical changes in the legal system, banking, child-care, health, education, employment, and interpersonal relations. The women of MOMMA addressed these issues in their newspaper/magazine as well as through workshops, resource centers, and rap sessions. Many of the articles focused on how women could accomplish changes for themselves, without relying on others or waiting for the system to change.

This type of practical, hands-on, integrative feminism parallels the feminism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in many ways. Perhaps because of the failure to pass the ERA, or because the conservative backlash worked so well, many women who considered themselves as feminists have moved away from campaigning for structural change through politics. Instead women rely on enacting their own form of feminism in their personal lives. Many career women choose to marry and have children later in life, if at all. An overwhelming number of mothers with small children work, both full-time and part-time, outside the home. Lesbian women, both single and couples, can choose to adopt children or take advantage of in vitro fertilization. Families rely on private day care facilities, relatives, flexible work schedules, and other creative ways to balance childcare and work. The

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<sup>190</sup> Simons, p. 351.

structure of the American employment system still tends to favor childless employees, forcing the utilization of pragmatic, individual resolutions to problems common among many.

In 1967, Margaret Albrecht published A Complete Guide for the Working Mother which was supposed to provide the “recipe for a happy home, where there are two working partners.” The book was supposed to help these mothers balance the double duty of working both in and out of the home. Tucked away in the middle of the book, Albrecht included a short, ten-page chapter titled “Mothers on Their Own” where she addressed the “one and a half million working mothers who are widowed, divorced, or separated from their husbands.” She reassured them that she wasn’t “writing this chapter from any heights of ‘understanding your problems.’” Because, “I know what it’s like to be a mother on your own.”<sup>191</sup> Coming from someone who had experienced single motherhood firsthand, one would have expected her to provide excellent tips and advice on how to be a great single mother. Not so. Most of the pages were dedicated to advice on how to find a new husband. This was certainly a reflection of the times as there was still great ambivalence in the late 60s towards single mothers and most people considered the nuclear family to be the best family type for raising children. Divorced, widowed, or unmarried women were supposed to *want* to find a spouse. Single fathers were not mentioned at all in Albrecht’s book.

Single mothers’ and fathers’ attitudes about themselves changed rapidly in the late 60s and throughout the 70s. This coincided with the spread of the women’s liberation movement, which demanded greater gender equality and more freedom of choice, and a

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<sup>191</sup> Margaret Albrecht, *A Complete Guide for the Working Mother* (New York: Award Books, 1967), 62.

rise in the number of single parent families. One study found that “single parent families increased 117.6% between 1970 and 1983, while two parent families decreased 4.2%”<sup>192</sup> By 1984 there were almost as many one-parent families as there were married-couple families with children under 18 years old. About 29% of all households had married parents, while 26% were headed by single parents.<sup>193</sup> Ideas about single motherhood had changed so greatly that by 1992, The Working Mother’s Guilt Guide addressed America’s 8 million single mothers in a much more understanding tone. The authors even acknowledged that many single mothers preferred parenting alone and conceded that, “In your saner moments, you realize that marriage would mean an end to the cozy little family you’ve created. Introduce a man into the household, and in no time at all, he’d be making demands.”<sup>194</sup> And by the 1980s, single dads had begun publishing their own stories, like Jim Covington’s memoir *Confessions of a Single Father*. Published in 1982, the author wrote the book “particularly for men who in their efforts to define themselves, are seeking to understand what fatherhood means.” Even though women headed about 90% of single parent households, the number of single fathers grew significantly from the late sixties through the eighties. Single-father families grew from less than half a million in 1970 to 2 million in 2003. In addition, increasing numbers of non-custodial fathers were granted extended amounts of visitation and were more involved in the everyday aspects of childcare than their fathers’ generation.

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<sup>192</sup> Shirley M.H. Hanson and Michael J. Sporkowski, “Single Parent Families,” *Family Relations*, vol. 35, no. 1 (Jan. 1986), 4.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>194</sup> Mary C. Hickey and Sandra Salmans, *The Working Mother’s Guilt Guide: Whatever You’re Doing, It Isn’t Enough* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 112-113.

Women came to single motherhood through a number of avenues including widowhood, divorce, separation, unwed motherhood, abandonment, even husbands being sent to prison. Whereas before 1970, most single mothers were widows, afterwards the majority of women entered single motherhood through divorce. It was in 1970 in California that new no-fault divorce laws first appeared in the U.S., making divorce much easier to obtain by doing away with the burden of proving one party of committing crimes such as adultery or abuse. Similar laws were enacted in the UK in 1969 and throughout other Western industrialized nations in the 70s, resulting in a rise in divorces globally. An effect of this change was many judges' decisions to decrease alimony payments of husbands to ex-wives. One single mother in the 70s described it as a "thinly veiled, heartfelt vengeance which says to the divorcing mother, 'You got what you've been asking for; you're free as a man, now see how much fun it is.' This attitude exercises itself in the halls of justice as well as on the streets."<sup>195</sup> In those early years, "There was little recognition of the difficulties facing single mothers. An article by Diana Pearce, in which she coined the term 'feminization of poverty,' initially met with little interest. Finally published in 1978, its point would soon be taken up by many others: The inadequacy of child support awards and the failure to enforce even those relatively meager orders, the lack of child care, poor wages. Despite such hardships, growing numbers of women were managing to stay out of poverty through their own efforts, aided by some policies that chipped away at constraints to their employment."<sup>196</sup>

<sup>195</sup> Carol Powers, "No-Fault Divorce," *Momma: the sourcebook for single mothers* (New York: The New American Library, 1976), 83.

<sup>196</sup> Susan Thistle, *From Marriage to the Market: The Transformation of Women's Lives and Work* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 87.

Combined with challenges single mothers faced securing well-paid employment, housing for herself and her children, and affordable and safe child care, the plight of single mothers in the early 70s seemed grim. Yet, testimony from many of these single mothers showed that they were embracing a new outlook on their time as single mothers; instead of seeing the breakup of their marriage as a time of failure, they focused on the advantages it would bring in being able to raise their children more successfully and with more attention. Kristin, a single mom from Massachusetts, said, "I'd rather be lonely than unhappy. It's easier for me to bring up the child alone... She's not a burden, far from it. Maybe because I don't have a husband, I don't feel the same way [as other mothers]."<sup>197</sup> Kristin enrolled in the WIN program in order to go to college. She wanted to get her degree in order to have a better life, but also because she didn't want to regret NOT going and somehow take that out on her daughter. Like many other 70s single mothers influenced by new ideas about feminism and motherhood, Kristin identified personal happiness with being a better mother.

In addition to practical and logistical challenges of employment and housing, single mothers faced the more obscure prejudice against women as independent entities and citizens. Law professor Martha Fineman explained that, "In poverty discourses... Mother [was] modified by her legal relationship, or lack thereof, to a male. Mothers are classified by whether or not they are single... The characterization of some single mothers as 'bad' corresponds to the popular and political classification of the poor as either 'deserving' or 'undeserving'."<sup>198</sup> The lack of a husband eroded the legitimacy of single mothers to act

<sup>197</sup> "Voices: Kristin (Massachusetts)," *Momma*, 35-39.

<sup>198</sup> Martha Fineman, "Images of Mothers in Poverty Discourse," *Mothers in Law* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), 211 & 214.

as citizens with claims to full rights. In fact, social and legal institutions actively pursued a punitive course of action against mothers without husbands, while at the same time, assumed mothers continued dependency upon men. This directly contradicted the feelings of single mothers who were frustrated by the continued struggle perpetuated by 'old-fashioned' views of family and motherhood. One single mother in the UK in the late '70s wrote, "I would like to suggest that the majority of one-parent families can, do, or could work. Many of us *want* to bring up our children independently of both man and state. We like to earn the cash that keeps our households together."<sup>199</sup> But women continued to be hindered by low wages in what were considered female jobs and a lack of opportunities in the male careers which typically paid family wages.

For many single mothers, the main objective of creating a new single-parent family remained the desire to provide their children with the best possible *care*. Challenges such as low-paying jobs, lack of child care, and unsafe housing got in the way of meeting that goal, but they saw that society could not get past its prejudices against single motherhood, so they incorporated new methods of parenting in order to achieve their ultimate goal. One concept that many working single mothers embraced was Quality time vs quantity – Phyllis Fleishman, director of the Modern Play School in LA, discussed giving children "special time" where the parent spends 15 minutes focused solely on what the child wants to do. She encouraged parents to let the child decide. Children need special attention, but it doesn't have to be all day. "You could look on this special time almost as therapy for a child, a time when he feels special, unique, listened to." "It counteracts the obvious

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<sup>199</sup> Diana Davenport, *One Parent Families: A Practical Guide to Coping* (London: Pan Original, Pan Books, 1979) 13.



displeasure that 'Mom is always busy doing the dishes or working and she doesn't have time for me.'"<sup>200</sup>

One single mother gave up being a Supermom in order to be a *better* mother. "I had to find out what they needed, what was missing for them. And that meant listening to them. Giving them a chance to participate in what goes on in our family... We are learning to problem-solve together. I've been so good at laying down the law, I have not seen how much they can contribute to working out our lives, how much they need to feel included in what goes on between us."<sup>201</sup> Single-parent families began to reshape the hierarchy of the family, where the parents direct from above and children followed orders. Single mothers who felt overburdened by work, both inside and outside the home, turned to new parenting styles which incorporated more democratic family models. One single mother who was having difficulty working full-time and keeping up with the housework explained, "I heard about the 'family meeting concept'... something about families being run democratically, kids and parents sharing the decisions and the work load of the family equally so that everyone was involved, said their piece, and no one person felt up upon."<sup>202</sup> As Phyllis Fleishman explained, "One of the most important decisions in which children should be involved is *household chores*. This area causes more resentment among children than any other family issue. Two parents can't do all the work, let alone one. There has to be some kind of participation in a community aspect of living. Instead of *telling* the child what to do... turn the problem over to a family meeting."<sup>203</sup> For a

<sup>200</sup> Lisa Connolly, "Special Times: A Recipe for Contented Children, an interview with Phyllis Fleishman," *Momma*, 253-5.

<sup>201</sup> "Supermom? An Interview with Penny Kiepler," *Momma*, 266-7.

<sup>202</sup> Conni Rust, "Who Gets to Clean the Toilets in Your House?" *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>203</sup> Lisa Connolly, "Sibling Rivalry: an interview with Phyllis Fleishman," *Ibid.*, 283.

number of women, this also meant letting go of the high standards of cleanliness and orderliness their own mothers expected from housekeeping.

Some ideas about alternative families and cooperative parenting came out of the women's liberation movement. Despite early radical rhetorical attacks on motherhood as oppression, most cultural feminists saw great power in the figure of the mother. For single mothers, the feminist movement provided an additional message for mothers in educating and caring for children. Karol Hope, single mother and co-founder of the group Momma: the organization for single mothers, explained that, "Our motherhood, particularly our single motherhood, has created an understanding of oppression experienced by few others. For perhaps the first time, there exists a class of women (us) who must necessarily confront what it means to create *unoppressed* human beings. We, as mothers, are continually concerned with the values and environment that are absolutely vital to this creation... Now we have the choice. We are single mothers, unhindered by the emotional demands (and limits) of an unenlightened male partner."<sup>204</sup> For these politicized mothers, caring for their children meant helping to change the shape of American society towards greater gender equality and freedom.

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<sup>204</sup> Karol Hope, "End of the Line," *Ibid.*, 248-9.

## CHAPTER 4 MAKING ENDS MEET: SUPPORTING THE SINGLE MOTHER FAMILY

*If only I had time*

*to write*

*I'd write*

*about*

*not having time*

*to write*

--- Beverly Slapin<sup>205</sup>

Single mothers in the 1970s quickly identified, and their supporters agreed, that the most important factor in determining the success of single- mother-headed families was, at base, economic. When the Finer Report was published, it focused on ways to reform social policies in order for single mothers to be able to successfully support their families. The Report identified, “the fundamental issue is the need to raise the pay and status of working women.”<sup>206</sup> Single mothers needed improved opportunities to be able to support themselves without husbands. In societies favoring nuclear families and in a workforce which was biased toward male labor, single mothers faced great challenges in becoming legitimate heads-of-household. In addition, not all single mothers had the skills, support systems, resources, personal drive, or luck to make single parenting work for them during this time of historical transition. Institutional structures, economic changes, and continued social stigma about single parenting combined with mothers’ personal

<sup>205</sup> Beverly Slapin, *The Magic Washing Machine: A Diary of Single Motherhood* (Mesquite, Texas: Ide House, Inc., 1983), 5.

<sup>206</sup> Pat Thane and Tanya Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?: Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 160.

situations made successful single parenthood a gamble, in many ways. In the 1970s, women earned about half of what men earned and were often ghettoized into “pink collar” or service-oriented jobs. Older single mothers, who divorced after staying home or working only part-time while raising their children, found themselves without the skills to compete in the job market. With the implementation of “no-fault” divorce after 1970, women reported that judges scaled back the amount of alimony payments awarded during divorce and child support awards were often small and difficult for mothers to collect. While some single mothers could turn to their families for help, many of the middle-class single mothers analyzed in this study testified that their families were unwilling to help them and reported feeling guilty about the shame they brought on their families. For women with no alternatives, welfare existed to provide some basic needs, but the economic crisis of the 1970s forced many city and state governments to cut back services and reforms at the state and federal level targeted single mother families, forcing a debate over welfare rights, the meaning of motherhood, and the worthiness of poor mothers. This chapter will examine the ways in which single mothers worked to support themselves, through combinations of paid labor, education, child support, assistance from family and friends, and government assistance. While critics, legislators, and public opinion viewed single motherhood as a serious social problem and the root of these broken families’ dilemmas, single mothers themselves identified major flaws in the labor market, welfare system, and in society’s perception of single motherhood which forced them to make creative decisions about how to support their families. The common thread running through the lives of these single mothers, regardless how they managed to support their families, was their ingenuity, and personal drive. Single mothers often

transitioned from one form of aid to another, or utilized several sources at once, cobbling together a way to make ends meet.

In the U.K., when the Finer Commission finally published its report in 1971, it confirmed what many already knew to be one of the basic problems for single mothers: most single-mother headed families lived in poverty. The Commission's study stated, "Our examination of the financial circumstances of one parent families showed that they were, in general, much worse off than two parent families. Two groups among them are slightly better off than the others, though still worse off than two parent families generally; widows, who already have a state insurance benefit, and lone fathers, who can command higher earnings than lone mothers."<sup>207</sup> Two-parent families had many economic advantages: men averaged higher salaries than women, two working parents could provide far greater earnings than a mother alone, two parents could share child care arrangements and minimize childcare costs, and cohabiting often saved adult couples money. As discussed in Chapter One, the Finer Commission recommended implementing a cash allowance for all one-parent families as part of the greater benefits scheme offered by the Welfare State, but that solution never materialized.<sup>208</sup> Single mothers in the U.S. shared similar fates, as the economic downturn of the early 1970s forced many local governments to cut already meager welfare assistance for those who had turned to the government for support. The mothers could not wait for answers from the government, however. They had to make ends meet using their ingenuity and the opportunities available to them in their own circumstances.

<sup>207</sup> Finer Joint Action Committee, pg. 2, LOC – check notes for bib info.

<sup>208</sup> NCUMC, *Forward for the Fatherless* (London, May 1971). Women's Library

One of the greatest challenges single mothers faced also affected mothers in general. While societies agreed that, in theory, raising children was the most important job in the world most Western nations took the work mothers did for granted. In fact, as Ann Crittenden has exposed over the past four decades, motherhood exacted a high cost on the female half of the population. “A mother’s work is not just invisible,” Crittenden writes, “it can become a handicap.”<sup>209</sup> Employers justified discrimination against mothers by claiming they will take more time off from work to care for children and that they cost more as employees because of maternity leave. They paid mothers less because they saw mothers’ needs for irregular work schedules, part-time work, and leaving the workforce for longer periods of time to bear and raise children as a reflection on mothers’ relationship to the workforce; Employers claimed mothers didn’t need to work and were not as committed as fathers.<sup>210</sup> Crittenden refers to these kinds of moves against mothers as the Mommy Tax. Single mothers not only bore the burden of the Mommy Tax, but they experienced a double handicap because of the social discrimination they faced as single mothers.

They are more vulnerable to the social and sexual discrimination against all women, as well as the discrimination against those who live outside what is believed to be the conventional family pattern – the nuclear family. Single mothers face difficult and insidious choices. They must provide and care for their children. But neither the state benefits they can receive, nor the wages they are likely to earn in the jobs available to women, take women and their children out of poverty. Part of the problem is that our society

<sup>209</sup> Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World is Still the Least Valued* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 3.

<sup>210</sup> Penny Letts, *Double Struggle: Sex-Discrimination and One-Parent Families* (London, National Council for One Parent Families, 1983), 33. “Discrimination against mothers in employment is demonstrated by the notion of risk assumed to exist by employers, in anticipation that parents responsible for children (i.e. mothers or occasionally lone fathers) are less reliable than workers with no dependent children. This notion is applied to mothers, as it is assumed that fathers’ commitment to their work takes priority over their family responsibilities, but for mothers the opposite applies. Certainly no help is offered to mothers to help them cope with both family and work responsibilities.”

generally neglects the needs of those who do the work of caring for young children and other dependants (sic). Inadequate nursery provision and deteriorating services create isolation and frustration, while the inflexible hours of employment discriminate against those with domestic responsibilities. State policies, conditions of employment and even most trade union practices still assume that it is women who are the domestic workers, and who as dependent wives should be supported by a male wage. Yet our changing family forms and women's involvement in paid work make nonsense of this assumption.<sup>211</sup>

As described in the passage above, social beliefs about the division of labor in the private sphere affected the opportunities and attitudes in the public sphere. Because most people believed that children should be raised in a nuclear family and that, within the family, mothers should provide primary care for children, employers and government agencies created policies reflecting those beliefs. The needs of working mothers seemed irrelevant and costly to employers and if those working mothers happened to be single parents, then their needs also seemed anti-family or deviant. By upholding this version of the gendered division of labor, employers and governments effectively created a situation which pitted single mothers' primary responsibilities – child rearing and breadwinning – against one another.

Feminism gave women new rhetoric and tools for discussing, framing, and claiming expanded rights of citizenship. Much of the conversation around women's equal rights had to do with extending male citizenship to women. Thus, male citizenship was normalized in the process. The two major paths to full citizenship included the liberal value of the "individual" and the economic standard of the ideal worker or "breadwinner." These ideals, fused together, caused limitations and roadblocks for those women who could not fulfill normative patriarchal roles. Single mothers, in particular, faced extreme

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<sup>211</sup> Lynne Segal, "Foreward," in Penny Letts, *Double Struggle: Sex Discrimination and One-Parent Families* (London: National Council for One Parent Families, 4). LOC

challenges to their legitimacy as mothers, their right to full citizenship, and their claims on both the labor system and the state for creating opportunities and assistance in fulfilling their conflicting roles. This section will examine the views of unwed mothers as they struggled to legitimize their position in society and claim their full rights as citizens. Many single mothers understood the connection between economic opportunity and social status. They criticized the system of divorce, from lawyers to judges, which they saw as a culprit in the creation of the feminization of poverty. They bemoaned the federal and state welfare systems, identifying the ways in which these institutions failed to help single mothers achieve full citizenship. They investigated the American economic system, questioning the ways in which sexism and capitalism combined dangerously to keep single mothers in the lowest echelons of the workforce.

There was a surge in the publication of self-help guides and autobiographical testimonies about making it as a single mom. Many of these “focused on child support enforcement, the recalcitrance and discriminatory practices of employers, the sheer grinding difficulty of the feminization of poverty, and men’s violent and controlling behavior in marriage and divorce.”<sup>212</sup> Also embedded in these publications was the larger theoretical debate about motherhood and citizenship. Even though many of the pieces focused on pragmatic issues and how to overcome obstacles, single mothers also engaged in the debate concerning the tensions between motherhood and citizenship. In the March 1973 issue of MOMMA: the newspaper/magazine for single mothers, Dorothy O’Connor wrote an article about the failure of FAP (Family Assistance Plan), President Nixon’s proposed replacement of the bureaucratic welfare system that would have

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<sup>212</sup> Lisa D. Brush, “Worthy Widows, Welfare Cheats: Proper Womanhood in Expert Needs Talk about Single Mothers in the United States, 1900 to 1988,” *Gender and Society* 11, no. 6 (December 1997): 739.



eliminated services and provide direct cash payments to the poor. In it, she expressed disdain for experts who decried the increase in single mothers on the welfare rolls and who debated the appropriate measures to reduce “dependency on poverty” and to increase “incentives to work.” O’Connor explained, “We don’t need any ‘work incentive.’ The search for our own personal fulfillment and the survival and well-being of our children are the only work incentives we need. Only, we need the freedom and opportunity to seek this fulfillment with dignity.”<sup>213</sup> O’Connor saw the feminization of poverty as a key obstacle in the path of single mothers to reach full citizenship; their very freedom was affected by their inability to support their families.

A core value of American citizenship has always been independence. Indeed, the Founding Fathers envisioned citizens as men who possessed enough property to make them independent individuals – free from the influence of outside powers. Enlightenment ideology influenced early American values of citizenship and placed an “emphasis on the individual’s potential for self-improvement and civic participation.”<sup>214</sup> Employees, women, children and slaves were unable to participate as full citizens in part because of their dependent status. This Enlightenment ideal carried forward in American politics, with the effect of favoring those individuals who can recreate the propertied male status of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. In modern times, this equates to those persons who can participate unencumbered in the workforce. The ideal worker, therefore, became identified as the Breadwinner – a worker who could commit himself entirely to the labor market. This worker was assumed to have a family, with a wife at home to perform domestic duties to

<sup>213</sup> Dorothy O’Connor, “The FAP Fizzle: or poverty & the single mother” *MOMMA: the newspaper/magazine for single mothers* 1, no. 4 (March 1973): 1-2.

<sup>214</sup> Jessica Toft and Laura S. Abrams, “Progressive Maternalists and the Citizenship Status of Low-Income Single Mothers,” *The Social Service Review* 78, no. 3 (September 2004): 448.

support the worker. The ideal of the Breadwinner, created in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and reified in the decades after World War II, imposed strict gender roles for men and women. Modern work and welfare policies have reinforced the gendered norms of the Breadwinner, with far reaching consequences for families without male Breadwinners. M. M. Slaughter argued that “Foucauldian power works... to produce compulsory Motherhood for women. Central to this production are the power relations that exist between the waged labor market and the nuclear family... these are interrelated. Because of that, so are the roles of Breadwinner and Mother. One will change only if the other changes.”<sup>215</sup> Single mothers of the 1970s struggled against this interconnection, recognizing the need for changes in both roles.

What all of this meant in real terms was that single mothers had to be creative in finding ways to earn money to support their families. They faced unfairness and setbacks, to be sure. As one divorced mother found out, “When a single mother returns to her career after 10-20 years as a wife or single parent, she’s at the bottom of the ladder!”<sup>216</sup> But a number of the middle-class, white single mothers in this study were fairly well-educated and proved to be inventive, hard-working, and tenacious. Indeed, many of them had been moved by feminist ideology and believed that the jobs they chose should not only help them provide for their families financially, but they also wanted to be fulfilled psychologically and emotionally by their new careers. A number of the women talked about how rewarding work helped them become better mothers. However, many single

<sup>215</sup> M.M. Slaughter, “The Legal Construction of ‘Mother’” in *Mothers in Law: Feminist Theory and the Legal Regulation of Motherhood*, eds. Martha Albertson Fineman and Isabel Karpin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 74.

<sup>216</sup> Penny Letts, *Double Struggle: Sex-Discrimination and One-Parent Families* (London, National Council for One Parent Families, 1983), 32.

mothers struggled to find jobs or careers that fulfilled their personal dreams while also making enough to support their families. Indeed, it was noted at the time that, “Most families need two paychecks to provide for the needs of family members at an above subsistence level. However, among one-paycheck families with children when the breadwinner is a man, the family’s median annual income is 85 percent higher than when the breadwinner is a woman”.<sup>217</sup> Despite the grim statistics, women pursued careers that took advantage of their talents, skills, and desires. A majority of the women who wrote memoirs about their experiences as single mothers in the ‘70s and ‘80s wanted to work as writers and described the advantages and disadvantages of pursuing such a career.

Two of the mothers, Beverly Slapin and Alta, were poets who shifted between welfare, temporary work, and paid writing in order to pursue their goals. Slapin’s *Magic Washing Machine* recounts her experiences during pregnancy and first five years of her son Carlos’ life. She started out her journey on welfare, an experience she described in humiliating terms, and she discussed several low-paying jobs including waitressing where all she got was, “sore feet and seven twenty-three in tips.”<sup>218</sup> Throughout the diary, Slapin bemoaned the difficulty in finding time to write. At one point she:

...made a list today of all the things I had to do; later I crossed off the things

I had done. It looked like this:

SHOP

COOK

CLEAN

<sup>217</sup> Veronica Celani, *Self-Sufficiency for Single Parents: Is a Job Enough?* (Waterbury, Vermont: Department of Social Welfare, 1985), iv.

<sup>218</sup> Beverly Slapin, *The Magic Washing Machine: A Diary of Single Motherhood* (Mesquite, Texas: Ide House, Inc., 1983), 41.

LAUNDRY

FORMULA

READ

WRITE

I'll make another list tomorrow, even though I know its (sic) hopeless.<sup>219</sup>

Slapin continuously documented the monotony of life as a single mother as she was experiencing it; she recorded many of the mundane, daily duties that had to be repeated in order to care for her son as a way to expose the boredom. She turned to Valium at one point in order to get through each day. But Slapin eventually learned to cope with single motherhood and she learned how to work the system she often labeled as 'unfair'. In 1983, when applying for a full-time office job, she recognized that her time spent as a single mother had become a handicap and when prompted to list her previous occupation on the application, she contemplated her options:

Mother? (Yes, but bosses don't see that as enough to 'occupy' anyone.)  
Welfare Mother? (That's got to be one of the most creative occupations there is, figuring out how to make something out of nothing.) So, biting down on the pencil one more time, hoping no one was looking, I printed, very nervously, very carefully, very neatly – 'secretary'.<sup>220</sup>

Slapin understood what the employer *wanted* to hear. She also understood the stigma attached to being a single parent and knew that society did not value the skills gained by spending time caring for and supporting a child. Slapin got the job and spent her days typing, while her son Carlos played at daycare, and she lamented the lost time that she would rather have been writing poetry.

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 6.

Another poet single mother, Alta, also struggled with the daily chores and mundane tasks that distracted her from writing. In her memoir, she recorded her frustration at being forced into making choices between her children and her need to write poetry. Alta talked about her fears and pains when she wrote, "...so this morning the headache, the chores: dirty dishes, library books to return (overdue of course), a boxful of mail to answer: & the need to write, to say it all, to say my life is so full of sinks full of dishes, bills on the mantle; i wait until that so-called 'work' is done, i wait to write..."<sup>221</sup> Like Beverly Slapin, Alta realized how quickly and easily everyday responsibilities could take over and trap a single mother, limiting her ability to pursue tasks that fed her spirit. In order to find time to write, these single mothers had to find or make time. In an unconventional move for the era, Alta decided to fully commit to her desire to write by sharing custody of her two children with her former partner and father of her second child, Simon. She described their arrangement: "simon wanted the kids & so did i, so he has them one week, i have them the next. its been like that for 2 years now, mostly it works."<sup>222</sup> The arrangement proved to be successful and Alta continued writing and working as a second-wave feminist activist. In addition to writing poetry, Alta founded the Shameless Hussy Press, the first feminist press in the U.S., in 1969.<sup>223</sup> She worked tirelessly, publishing some of the most important feminist writers of the decade. But her poetry reveals the emotional and psychological tolls she paid for her commitment to the movement and to herself.

Some of Alta's poems chronicled the emotional tug-of-war single mothers (and probably most other mothers) could feel about the need to carve out time for themselves.

<sup>221</sup> Alta, *Momma: A Start On All the Untold Stories* (New York: Times Change Press, 1974), 7.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>223</sup> Alta Gerrey and Irene Reti, *Alta and the History of the Shameless Hussy Press, 1969-1989* (Regional History Project, University of California, Santa Cruz, 2001), 1.

They often suffered from overwhelming guilt – they felt guilty for wanting time away from their children and then, once they had time alone, they felt guilty for not being with their children. It seemed like a no-win situation. In this poem, Alta captured the essence of the internal turmoil:

maybe they could manage w/out me.  
 maybe i could steal  
 away a little time  
 in a different room  
 would they all still love me  
 when i came back?  
 & now theyre away. & i miss them.  
 all the things i wanted to do while theyre with dad,  
 all those things are beige & grey; to see people who  
 love me less than the children do...  
 the house is silent. its nice sometimes to be quiet;  
 to have no interruptions. its nice to write something  
 longer than 6 lines: ... i wish i could enjoy it.  
 ...why must i be a watchdog for 24 hours?  
 & then, when quiet comes, why must i be lonely?

we live wrong.  
 our lives are wrong.  
 to trap us in houses with no help,

to be sole guardians for little people,  
our lives are wrong.<sup>224</sup>

Alta understood the ways that social structures and cultural ideology about good mothering affected her emotions about choosing to make time for her personal passions. American mothers had been conditioned to believe that a good mother sacrificed everything for her children and that attending to children should come before other tasks.<sup>225</sup> Alta captured the dual nature of single motherhood; it was not an either/or choice for single mothers, they wanted BOTH: to love their children AND have time for personal fulfillment. The guilt and anxiety single mothers felt arose from the limiting social structures and cultural ideology that made single mothers feel deviant for trying to have a balanced life.

Beverly Slapin and Alta, above, seemed to turn to writing as a profession because of their internal *need* to write. They were poets and felt moved to get their thoughts and feelings onto paper. Many writers felt moved to write; it nourished their souls. Even though writing jobs could be flexible and offered a way for single mothers to work from home and be available for their children when needed, it was not simply the schedule that attracted these single-mother writers. Some turned to writing as a way to achieve the balanced lifestyle so many single mothers desired. While it required dedication and self-discipline, being a writer could offer single mothers an ideal way to make ends meet. At a time when many women were challenging social restrictions about career choices and lifestyles, single mothers helped advance the notion that good mothers could have careers. As author and single mother Carol Lynn Pearson put it, "...the whole notion of

<sup>224</sup> Alta, *Momma: a start on all the untold stories*, 75.

<sup>225</sup> Ehrenrich, *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts' Advice to Women* (New York: Anchor, 1978).

mother was being reconstructed and I and most women I knew were devising our own pattern, two patterns really, one marked 'homemaker' and one marked 'career,' and laying them out on the available material and pinning and cutting and stitching as best we could."<sup>226</sup> Like many women in the 1960s and '70s, Pearson acknowledged that single mothers forged new rules at a time when most of the traditional expectations about womanhood, motherhood, and gender were being challenged. They worked because they had to in order to support their families and many single mothers resented the implication that somehow this made them bad mothers. In fact, Pearson acknowledged that supporting her family was not the only reason she worked as a writer. She chose her career because of her personal passion for writing. She reasoned that if she had to work, which as a single mother she did, then she should do something that made her happy. Pearson continued her sewing analogy when she recounted, "Some of us *have* to wear two outfits. Others of us want to. I do both. If I don't write, my kids go hungry; therefore I have to. If I don't write, *I* go hungry; therefore I want to."<sup>227</sup> Middle-class, educated women who became single mothers in the 70s and 80s could take advantage of better career opportunities, like professional writing, and helped spread the message that mothers (whether single or not) could and *should* pursue personal fulfillment in their jobs.

Single mothers, by necessity, performed both the Breadwinner and Mother roles for their families. However, sexist labor market practices, shortages of acceptable and affordable daycare, and the social stigma of working motherhood all played a part in

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<sup>226</sup> Carol Lynn Pearson, *One On the Seesaw: The Ups and downs of a Single-Parent Family* (New York: Random House, 1988), 139.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.



making single mothers unsuccessful at performing the dual roles. A sociological study from 2002 examining the gender gap in poverty in eight western industrialized countries found “that households with single mothers and their children have the highest rates of poverty everywhere.”<sup>228</sup> The study went on to explain that this was true despite social welfare programs, increases in equal pay and employment opportunities, and a normalization of divorce over the past four decades. In the 1960s, the large increase in numbers of mother-headed households falling into poverty caused the phenomenon to warrant closer scrutiny. Daniel P. Moynihan pointed out that it was in the mid-‘60s that the American welfare program “Aid to Families With Dependent Children (A.F.D.C.) rolls swelled, overnight, to monumental proportions” and that the increase in the numbers was “demographic, not organizational, A.F.D.C. programs are by definition made up primarily of families of children that are headed by females. During this period, the number of such families and such children grew sharply and suddenly.”<sup>229</sup> Politicians across America struggled with the effects of this surge in poor mother-headed families, as state and federal welfare systems responded to their increased demand for benefits. They tried to understand *why* so many unwed mothers were turning to welfare. Was the welfare program too attractive? Were Civil Rights organizers helping more of the traditionally poor families qualify for welfare? Where, they wondered, were all of these single mothers coming from? Dorothy O’Connor and other single mothers already knew the answer. “We who are single mothers know very well the reason – because we are, in fact the

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<sup>228</sup> Karen Christopher, Paula England, Timothy Smeeding and Katherin Ross Philips, “The Gender Gap in Poverty in Modern Nations: Single Motherhood, the Market, and the State,” *Sociological Perspectives* 45, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 231.

<sup>229</sup> Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Politics of a Guaranteed Income: The Nixon Administration and the Family Assistance Plan* (New York: Random House, 1973), quoted in Dorothy O’Connor, *MOMMA* (March 1973), pg. 1

reason. It is no big mystery," she wrote. "As the divorce rate soared to one-half of all marriages in this country – so also did the welfare rolls soar. Many of us were 'deserted' by husbands. . . He split. Welfare took over."<sup>230</sup> Changing social and legal values, especially the rise in divorces, channeled these new families out of the labor market and onto welfare.

The ideal of the Breadwinner and sexist labor practices played an important role in causing the feminization of poverty, or what Nancy Folbre called the pauperization of motherhood.<sup>231</sup> O'Connor related a common realization among single mothers:

If we went out to work, we learned that our female head-of-household salary (one-half of the salary made by male heads of households) soon frizzled away on expenses necessary just to get us to work, on more expensive, time-saving packaged foods which we now had to feed our children, on child care and transportation and needed clothing. A great many of us lost our homes, either through foreclosures or forced sale, and we began our downward trip, taking our children with us into a lower standard of living. . . until we finally found ourselves at the welfare office doorstep with our hat (if we owned one) in our hands. We were ready to apply for A.F.D.C.<sup>232</sup>

A combination of deadbeat or underemployed fathers who provided little or no support, unequal employment opportunities and wages, a sexist housing market, and a lack of social supports for working parents (i.e. child care, flexible work schedules, etc.) forced many middle class mothers out of respectable citizenship and into a realm of poverty, welfare, stigma, and second-class citizenship.

Politicians and media pundits lamented the increasing number of mothers on welfare. They criticized the system for being too attractive and blamed welfare benefits

<sup>230</sup> O'Connor, p. 1

<sup>231</sup> Nancy Folbre, "The Pauperization of Motherhood: Patriarchy and Public Policy in the United States," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 72-88.

<sup>232</sup> O'Connor, p. 2.

for helping to create single-mother-headed families.<sup>233</sup> From the mothers' point of view, though, turning to welfare was a last resort that many considered shameful and humiliating. Their middle-class value system prioritized self-reliance and privacy, both of which disappeared upon entering the welfare rolls. The Welfare systems in both the U.S. and U.K. became notoriously demeaning toward recipients in the late 1960s and 1970s in response to the rapid increase of single mothers on welfare. Because welfare was means-tested, women applying for aid had to go through a series of intimidating interviews, having to prove their destitution and chastity. Much of the backlash against providing assistance to single mothers consisted of criticism of their supposed deviant sexual behavior; in general, critics denounced having sexual relations outside of marriage. Case workers began showing up in the middle of the night to "catch" a man in the home in order to oust so-called 'welfare queens' from the benefit rolls. Social workers also searched for evidence of men cohabiting, such as clothing or shaving products.<sup>234</sup> Women who applied for welfare benefits complained of the long interview process, the unhelpful office staff, and of being interrogated like criminals during the application process. In the U.K., mothers complained, "When you're claiming Supplementary Benefit, they make you feel so dirty. The service provided by the Government is basically good, but the officials make you feel so low. I wish I could work and come off Supplementary Benefit. I find it so humiliating."<sup>235</sup>

<sup>233</sup> Aletha Huston, ed., *Children in Poverty: Child Development and Public Policy* (Cambridge UP, 1991), 73.

<sup>234</sup> Government agents followed the "Cohabitation Rule" where benefits (including widow's benefits) could be stopped if the woman was living with a man as 'man and wife.' There was an assumption that a man living on the premises was providing support. This was often not the case and women were punished for simply having sexual relations with men, see Catherine Itzin, *Splitting Up: Single-Parent Liberation* (London, Virago: 1980), 92.

<sup>235</sup> Penny Letts, *Double Struggle: Sex-Discrimination and One-Parent Families* (London, National Council for One Parent Families, 1983), 20.

As with many women who engaged in paid labor to support their families, single mothers receiving welfare benefits from the state for economic survival typically lived in poverty. Legislators in most Western industrialized countries debated the amounts and kinds of benefits that single mothers should be given. Supporters of single mothers argued for providing larger cash payments as well as child care, money for education and training, and housing allowances to help bring these families above the poverty level. Opponents argued that expanding benefits would be too costly for the government and worried that raising rates of allowances would make single motherhood more attractive and only increase cases of illegitimate motherhood. It was argued that, "Help for one-parent families is seen as under-mining the dominant two-parent family and with it the structure of society."<sup>236</sup> From the point of view of the mothers, however, the debate about welfare benefits seemed disconnected from the reality of their everyday lives.

In the UK, for example, "The differing levels of state benefits reflect society's attitudes towards people of different marital status. Thus those lone parents regarded as deserving of public sympathy (e.g. widows) are rewarded with higher benefits, while parents trying to support themselves and their families by working are granted Family Income Supplement to bring their income to a slightly higher level compared to those families dependent solely on Supplementary Benefit...One mother said, 'I'm seriously thinking of turning to crime –merely to survive. All my life I have been a good, honest person, but now I wonder what is the point anymore.'<sup>237</sup> While society continued to try and categorize, label, and judge single mothers based on how they came to single mother

<sup>236</sup> Catherine Itzin, *Splitting Up: Single-Parent Liberation* (London, Virago: 1980), xii.

<sup>237</sup> Penny Letts, *Double Struggle: Sex-Discrimination and One-Parent Families* (London, National Council for One Parent Families, 1983), 18.

status, mothers themselves began to form a bond in the 1970s recognizing that their similarities were far greater than their differences. One branch of mothers, influence by feminist theory, advocated for increased welfare benefits as a right of citizenship. These women argued that the care-work single mothers provided benefited society and that single mothers who choose to stay home should be paid for the labor they perform.

Some mothers changed the way they thought about welfare benefits out of necessity, not ideology. As one British mother put it, "I had lots of problems with Social Security as well, 'cos I used to hate taking their money as much as my husband's. I thought I was asking them for something for nothing. In the end things got so bad... I had so many bills, and it was winter, so I wrote them a nice letter saying I'm entitled to a grant for children's clothing... And they wrote back a letter to me saying that the money they gave me every week should cover the children's clothing and things like that."<sup>238</sup> Because she was still married, although separated from her husband, Social Security informed her to take her husband to court, which she knew would be useless. The difficulty in navigating the bureaucracy and the unjust responses this mother received changed her attitude about requesting government assistance. She shifted from the dominant view that welfare recipients were getting something for doing nothing to the single-mother point of view which posited that society helped create the barriers to successful single-parenting, therefore society should provide assistance to single mothers.

Because wages for women were so low and because single mothers had the primary (and often sole) responsibility to care for their children, single mothers needed to carefully assess the costs and benefits of taking paid work versus filing for welfare. When

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<sup>238</sup> Catherine Itzin, *Splitting Up: Single-Parent Liberation* (London, Virago: 1980), 95.

single mothers worked, they had to be able to afford child care in order to leave the home. In the 1970s, child care in general, and decent child care in particular, was appalling difficult to find. If the wages were not enough to cover the woman's costs of working, including child care, transportation fees, clothing, etc., then her alternative was to file for welfare. Theoretically, welfare would support her and her children's basic needs while she remained home to care for them. Unfortunately, the '70s was a time of transition in welfare policies internationally and women found smaller benefits and more demands for mothers to work in order to receive aid. As the decade wore on and as the 1980's began, women faced even greater challenges in making welfare work. One mother described her dilemma:

There I was, with two children to support, a mortgage to meet, and I didn't know what to do. So naturally I tried to collect welfare. Well, I have found that it takes a year to get one dollar! I mean, by the time I do, I could be out having two or three jobs. The thing was, I could have gotten any job, but to take a job that's going to pay me \$80 a week when I have to pay out so much for child care, it wouldn't pay me. During the summer, in order for me to work, my daughter has to be watched or sent to camp because she's too young to be left alone. For me to work eight or nine hours a day, she has to be taken care of.<sup>239</sup>

From single mothers' perspectives, society's conflict over what to do with fatherless families created a lack of sensible options.

The majority of single mothers in the 1970s became heads of household due to divorce. Although judges had begun to decrease alimony payments after the implementation of no-fault divorce laws, they continued to award child support to custodial mothers as part of the divorce decree. Unfortunately, many mothers complained, the child support awards were often low and women frequently had difficulty in collecting

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<sup>239</sup> Helen (New Jersey), "Voices 'Where's My Everything?'" , in Karol Hope, *Momma; the sourcebook* (New York: The New American Library, 1976), 11.

payments from former husbands. Critics used the terms “deadbeat dads” and “runaway pappies” to describe fathers who neglected to support their legal offspring. Ex-wives found it nearly impossible to collect payments owed to them and the court system failed miserably in enforcing child support decrees. As a method of supporting their children, single mothers complained frequently of their inability to rely on child support.

The legal system and social mores created a norm for mothers within the nuclear family, and created a connection between a male father and a female mother resulting in dependency of a woman upon a man. As these types of connections were being challenged and reformed in the 1970s, women felt the effects of conflicting values. A MOMMA article, written by Carol Powers, highlighted how this problem affected women seeking divorce in the '70s. In January 1970, the California Law Act eliminated previous grounds for divorce (including blame-related situations such as adultery) and replaced them with two: irreconcilable differences and incurable insanity. The divorce rate jumped to near 70% by the mid-'70s and some serious trends emerged that adversely affected divorced women. One of these was a reduction in alimony. As historian Stephanie Coontz explained, “The tendency of many courts during the 1970s to reduce alimony and maintenance allowances for wives was based on the mistaken assumption that because more women were working, male-female equality had already been achieved.”<sup>240</sup> Powers placed a more sinister spin on judges' reasons for reducing alimony awards. She wrote that candid judges would admit to a “thinly-veiled, heartfelt vengeance which says to the divorcing mother, ‘You got what you’ve been asking for; you’re as free as a man, now see

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<sup>240</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 83.

how much fun it is.”<sup>241</sup> Many women, who had devoted their entire adult lives to providing domestic support to their husbands and participated in full-time childrearing were effectively given zero compensation for this work. They entered the work force at a disadvantage, with little or no work experience. Judges’ reduction of alimony payments, regardless of the reason, penalized single mothers’ lack of a husband.

In many cases, ex-wives faced great difficulty in collecting alimony and child support payments from their former spouses. Some men turned into “deadbeat dads” and simply refused to pay while others honestly could not afford their responsibilities due to unemployment or other exigent circumstances. Many fathers without custody simply abandoned their former families and disappeared across state or national borders, making it nearly impossible for single mothers to collect payments due. In one very early and extreme case of a runaway father, Pat Bennett, a divorced mother of three, searched for seventeen years to find her ex-husband, David, who had moved to several different states and changed his name. Originally, Pat thought that David had died. She found out that he was not only alive, but that during those years, David had remarried twice, also abandoning wife number two and children from that marriage. David had left Pat in the late 1960s, at a time when the law was trying to catch up with the changing nature of divorce. When Pat discussed her case with a clerk at the Fairfax County Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court, the clerk was amazed at the case:

It became clear to Linda [the clerk] that David had been missing for sixteen years, living under an assumed identity, and that Pat had actually gone out and found him. She had never heard this sort of child-support case before... “At fifty dollars a week, that’s twenty-six hundred dollars a year... My God, that’s almost forty-two thousand dollars in back child support.”<sup>242</sup>

<sup>241</sup> Carol Powers, “No Fault Divorce,” *MOMMA* (March 1973), pg. 3.

<sup>242</sup> Richard Rashke, *Runaway Father: The True Story of Pat Bennett, her daughters, and their seventeen-year search*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 90.



Pat's case was extreme, but certainly not unique. Pat's ex-husband had moved to Florida, a state that was notorious for helping to harbor runaway fathers. Florida made it almost impossible to extradite fathers to other states where they owed back child-support, making it impossible for these mothers to make them pay.

Mothers who experienced delinquent payments from their ex-spouses, and many family court lawyers, staff, and judges all agreed that the system was flawed:

Although she was neither an attorney nor a counselor, Linda understood how badly the system was stacked against women and children. Fail to pay your income taxes, and you commit a felony. The IRS doesn't let up even if it costs them two hundred thousand dollars to collect ten thousand dollars in back taxes. Imagine what would happen if word leaked out that the IRS wasn't bothering with delinquent taxpayers anymore?<sup>243</sup>

The failure of the IRS to prosecute delinquent fathers showed just how little attention society paid to the plight of single mothers. Mothers like Pat understood that the only way they would get justice would be to have the power of a government agency like the IRS on their side. But the cause seemed almost hopeless given the state of the situation Pat faced. As Linda, the clerk working on Pat's case, explained it:

Fail to pay your bill at Sears, and the company hires bill collectors or takes you to court even if it loses money. Imagine what would happen if word got around that Sears wasn't bothering to collect unpaid bills. Fail to pay your tag fee, and the county tows your car away or refuses to renew your license. But steal forty-two thousand dollars from your kids, and the system looks the other way or slaps your wrist. Runaway dads were giving the court the finger, and the system was winking at them.<sup>244</sup>

Men had the upper-hand in the case of child-support delinquency. Without the support of some strong government agency and the will of the system to provide justice, Pat and other single mothers faced almost impossible odds.

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

Even by the early 1980s, when Pat found David and began to search for a way to find justice within the system, it was never certain that she would win her case. One in five children was poor in 1983. Fifty-six percent of children in female-headed households were poor. Less than one-half of all custodial parents receive child support from the absent parent of their children. The child support system failed to promote parental responsibility and contributed to the impoverishment of children.<sup>245</sup> Pat understood how difficult it would be for her to actually win her child support case, and also how necessary it was for women like her to push for change. In the end, because of women like Pat, Congress enacted the Child Support Enforcement Amendments of 1984. These amendments seek to strengthen child support enforcement, primarily by requiring States to adopt certain child support collection procedures for overdue payments, including mandatory income withholding, and by revising the incentive payment program to account for collections made on behalf of non-AFDC families.<sup>246</sup> And, although the civil courts might have been both ready and willing to cite nonpaying fathers for contempt, and even jail them for continuing non-compliance, these methods could not guarantee that single mothers would get the one thing they were seeking, regular full payments.<sup>247</sup>

Before the 1970s, single mothers had few options available to them. In *Runaway Father*, Pat Bennett was able to turn to her family for support when she first realized that her husband, David, had been cheating on her. “Pat called her parents collect and asked for help. They agreed to send airplane tickets for her and the children and offered to hire

<sup>245</sup> Veronica Celani, *Self-Sufficiency for Single Parents: Is a Job Enough?* (Waterbury, Vermont: Department of Social Welfare, 1985), iv.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>247</sup> Arlene Colman-Schwimmer and Leslie Abramson, “Enforcing Court Orders,” *Momma: the sourcebook* (NY: The New American Library, 1976), 95.

a van to bring her things back to Washington. They promised to find Pat an apartment and cover all her expenses until Andrea was old enough to allow her to go back to work. She accepted the offer as a loan.”<sup>248</sup>

Some women moved in together to make ends meet. “When they separated from their husbands two years ago, Judy Pursell, 52, and Kay Cybulski, 46, were unsure about where to live. Individual house payments were out of the question, even with good paying jobs. The best answer seemed to be merging households and children.”<sup>249</sup> Like the characters on the TV sitcom *Kate and Allie*, which aired from 1984 to 1989 on CBS, Pursell and Cybulski were longtime friends and both separated from their husbands in 1983, Pursell in April and Cybulski later in the summer. When Cybulski’s husband asked her to move out, she wondered what she and the children were going to do. “Then I thought about Judy,” she said, “because I knew she was also separated.” On her way to speak with Pursell, Cybulski stopped at the local supermarket where she surprisingly bumped into her friend! “It lent a feeling of divine providence to the plan. Over shopping carts, the women discussed and finalized the idea of merging households.” Pursell was very interested in the idea as well, because she had “just talked to a realtor about listing my house... I decided I couldn’t make the payment all by myself and I really hadn’t thought about any other solution except selling.”<sup>250</sup> Even though both women had good jobs, Pursell was a dental hygienist and Cybulski was a registered nurse, they could not afford to support themselves and their children on only one income. Like many families in the 1980s, they needed two incomes to maintain a middle-class lifestyle.

<sup>248</sup> Richard Rashke, *Runaway Father*, 6.

<sup>249</sup> Onetta L. Horr, “A Good Answer to ‘Life After Divorce,’” *The Ann Arbor News* (Jan. 11, 1986).

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*

Personality and outlook had a lot to do with the success of these experimental solutions. Cybulski said that, “Judy [Pursell] is really adaptable and non-judgmental. She wanted it to work and that’s why it did.” Pursell added, “It’s really not different than a family, except that we aren’t blood-related.”<sup>251</sup> These two themes, determination and family, repeated themselves throughout single mothers’ testimonials of the challenges they faced. They made the situation work because they had to. Failure was not an option. Because they were responsible for their families and wanted their families to succeed, single mothers created inventive new kinds of family units to meet their needs.

The level of education of a single mother could drastically affect her ability to support her family. Many women saw college as a way to improve their family’s chances of surviving without a husband. Since the end of World War II, the number of women attending colleges and universities had increased, but it was not until the late 1960s that female participation in higher education led to real changes in labor force participation. By the 1970s, women began demanding increased, even equal, access to professional programs, law schools, and medical schools.

At decade’s end, organizations aimed at helping single mothers began coordinating programs to provide education and training to what they called displaced homemakers, women who had previously left the job market to care for their families, but found themselves returning in mid-life, usually after divorce. In May 1980, Washtenaw Community College in Michigan hosted a pilot project run by the group Soundings: A Center for Women in their Middle Years called “Pathways to Jobs/Training for Displaced

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

Homemakers” that encouraged women to interview for eligibility if they met the following criteria:

has experienced sudden loss of income through widowhood, separation, divorce or other reasons; has been a homemaker at least ten years; is unemployed and needs a job for financial independence; is over 40 or has no children living at home under age 16; needs support, information, and self-confidence for entering the job market; can commit herself to the program for twelve weeks.<sup>252</sup>

The program was designed to provide displaced homemakers with the tools they would need to look for jobs that matched their skills, write a resume, and build confidence for the interview process. Soundings was founded in the late 1970s by a displaced homemaker, Jerry Brown, who was in her “middle years” herself and who returned to school, earning an MSW in April 1977. She realized that “many women in their ‘middle years’ were being left by their husbands – either through divorce or through death. Most of these women had been homemakers, with no current job skills/experiences, and few resources for creating a new life.” Jerry was introduced to Esther Donahue and, “working from Jerry’s front room, they began to plan their first conference for women, ‘Anchors and Options.’”<sup>253</sup> The organization operated out of space provided by Washtenaw Community College’s Cleary Business College.

In 1984, the Detroit *Free Press* featured an article about tuition assistance programs for single mothers run by the Michigan Department of Education at all twenty-nine Michigan Community Colleges for “certain vocational, technical, and job-seeking assistance courses... if you are a longtime homemaker who is now entering or re-entering the job market because of divorce, widowhood or desertion.” The article explained that

<sup>252</sup> Papers of *Soundings: A Center for Women in Their Middle Years*, folder 1, Bentley Historical Library, UMICH

<sup>253</sup> A Brief History of Soundings for Board Retreat 11/13/93, Soundings, folder “Background” history. Bentley Historical Library, UMICH.

the Department of Education wanted to advertise the program because they understood that many eligible women did not know about its existence. The Department representative also explained that an additional problem may have been keeping some women away:

Many of these displaced homemakers are proud not to receive assistance. Often they are somebody who was well provided for through a spouse, and now they are dependent. After they sign up and take some classes, they may feel more comfortable applying for other forms of assistance. Our program does not have the stigma of an aid program.<sup>254</sup>

By the early 1980s, officials had learned that single mothers needed training and education in order to secure well-paying jobs, but they faced some obstacles in obtaining the necessary training. Programs such as this tuition-assistance scheme targeted women who either did not know about the available aid or who were too embarrassed to ask for help.

Women needed to be creative in marketing the skills they had obtained over the years in their private lives in order to turn them into qualifications for the labor force. One organization aimed at helping displaced homemakers, called Target, explained that the “Homemaker in transition can expect to be asked, ‘Did you run the household? Did you carpool? Did you work for the Parent Teacher Association?’ If a woman can answer yes to any of those questions, they will find that the phrase, ‘I’m just a housewife’ no longer exists and that homemakers do have marketable job skills.”<sup>255</sup> Counselors helped women translate their real-life experiences into line on their resume.

Almost all of the single mothers examined in this chapter expressed that their immediate concerns upon becoming single mothers centered on finding ways to make

<sup>254</sup> Lona O’Connor, “Tuition Aid Helps Those Moving Into Job Market,” *Detroit Free Press* (Jan. 4, 1984).

<sup>255</sup> Brian Brock, “Maybe You’re Not ‘Just A Housewife,’” *Ann Arbor News* (Nov. 26, 1988).

ends meet. Shifting economic and social conditions of the 1970s provided both advantages and disadvantages for single mothers, however, increased opportunities in education, the labor market, and in society in general helped make it possible for single mothers to have a greater variety of choice than previous generations. There was no right way to be a single mother and the first great wave of seventies' single mothers experimented with different family forms, created support networks, and relied on their ingenuity to become successful, and normal, American families.

This issue of alimony directly related to American values concerning work, mothering, and the nuclear family. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, feminists struggled with the tensions caused by the distinctions made between the public and private spheres and poor women's need to work for wages. Wage labor performed outside the home consistently received far more value than unpaid domestic labor, regardless of the fact that both forms of work were required for the survival and success of the family. Respectable middle- and upper-class mothers remained virtuous by fulfilling their domestic roles and being represented in the public sphere by their husbands. In the Progressive Era, reformers like Jane Addams sought to assist poor mothers forced into wage labor to regain some of their status by virtue of their motherhood. However, an article examining progressive maternalists' views on single mothers showed that, "By encouraging women's work when economically necessary, Addams, Breckenridge, and Abbott brought about an unforeseen outcome; they promoted a broader view of the citizenship status of working women... because work outside the home opened the door to a fuller form of citizenship."<sup>256</sup> By the late 60s, many second-wave feminists felt the

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<sup>256</sup> Toft and Abrams, pg. 456.

connection between women's oppression and unpaid housework; their continued devaluation of domestic labor only reinforced the patriarchal system which disadvantaged mothers. Poor working mothers who engaged in paid labor *may* have had access to some citizenship rights via their relationship to the workforce; however, they opened themselves up to criticism of their performance as mothers. The mere separation of a mother from her child(ren) caused stigma for working mothers because "there is nothing worse a mother can do than to leave her child. Her absence itself is understood as the injury."<sup>257</sup> Single mothers who worked could not achieve respectable citizenship.

The single mothers of MOMMA addressed these issues by calling for a redefinition in the value of work and a decrease in stigma of those mothers who received welfare payments for mothering. MOMMA argued that, "It is with the AFDC mother who would prefer to stay home that the social undervaluing of housekeeping and childrearing provides the rationale for telling her that she must take a job to be eligible for welfare, and also for the notion that she is 'getting something for doing nothing.'"<sup>258</sup> Single mothers faced a strong backlash against supporting their efforts at being stay-at-home mothers. Even at a time when the ideal family consisted of a breadwinner father and a stay-at-home mother, single mothers experienced a serious lack of support from society and the state in achieving this ideal of motherhood. Instead of valuing the work full-time mothers provided and understanding the basic benefit to society, government agencies pushed for welfare mothers to find outside employment in order to "earn" help. The MOMMA article went on to explain, "The clear fact is that keeping house and raising children is

<sup>257</sup> Carol Sanger, "Mother from Child: Perspectives on Separation and Abandonment," in *Mothers in Law* (NY: Columbia, 1995), pg. 31.

<sup>258</sup> James O'Toole and Elliot Liebow, "Welfare: No Value in House 'Work'" *MOMMA* (March 1973), pg. 13



work – work that is, on the average, as difficult to do well and as useful to the larger society as almost any paid job involving the production of goods or services. The difficulty is not that most people don't believe this or accept it (we pay lip service to it all the time) but that, whatever our private and informal belief systems, we have not, as a society, acknowledged this fact in our public system of values and rewards."<sup>259</sup>

For those mothers who desired to stay home and raise their children full-time, the single mothers of MOMMA advocated a dual call to action: first, the realization that mothering was a legitimate action of citizenship on the part of the single mother and second, that the state had a duty to support single mothers by virtue of their work as mothers and citizens. MOMMA contributors understood that "promoting equal citizenship requires abandoning the idea that those who are not self-sufficient are of lesser worth."<sup>260</sup>

State institutions have built-in value systems that protect the rights of select citizens in achieving full rights of citizenship. While "begetting, bearing, and raising children are for many people part of the good or fulfilling life that the liberal state is obligated to protect," American political and legal institutions reserve the right to offer protection to those citizens deemed worthy.<sup>261</sup> American social policy gave preference to the traditional, nuclear, two-parent household, with a breadwinner father and full-time mother. Iris Young explained that "If a plausible link can be established between a particular family form and the ability of children to take their place as good citizens – independent and contributing members of the community - ... then this justifies the state's

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Iris Young, "Mothers, Citizenship, and Independence: A Critique of Pure Family Values," *Ethics* 105, no. 3 (April 1995), 536.

<sup>261</sup> Mary Shanley, "Fathers' Rights, Mothers' Wrongs?: Reflections on Unwed Fathers' Rights and Sex Equality," *Hypatia* 10, no. 1 (Winter 1995), 89.

preference for that family form and perhaps even limits the liberty of adults to raise children under other conditions.”<sup>262</sup> Unwed mothers faced limited liberty in the 1970s as they attempted to normalize their social position, challenge sex discrimination, and achieve respectable motherhood. Single mothers were unable to pursue full citizenship via two of the main avenues: full-time employment as individuals or full-time mothers with connections to a male partner. The mothers who joined together to create *MOMMA* challenged the limitations of citizenship defined by male parameters. Their discussions of pragmatic solutions to everyday problems revealed a deeper connection to the debate around citizenship, underscoring the feminist objective of altering both male and female gender norms in order to provide greater access to citizenship for all.

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<sup>262</sup> Iris Young, pg. 536.

## CHAPTER 5 FEMINIST FATHERHOOD: MEN CAN MOTHER TOO

*“The first years after the boys lost their mother they gave me a card on Mother’s Day. It was a kind thought; they knew I was filling in for her.”<sup>263</sup>*

-- Henry, single father, 1977

As the number of single-parent families increased and became part of mainstream American culture, middle-class single parents faced challenges in being able to provide the best care for their children. They had to take on multiple roles of breadwinner, housekeeper, and parent, roles that competed for their time. Many single parents viewed the *care work* they performed to be the *most important job* they held and sought out ways to maintain standards of living. Decades before the term would be coined, they created a work-life balance that would enable them to provide their children with the best parenting possible. Due to the gendered structure of social institutions and social mores, the number of single mothers far surpassed that of single fathers. Indeed, only about 10 percent of single-family households were headed by fathers. Even so, reports have shown that, “by 1983 there were almost 600,000 divorced and separated single fathers raising children under eighteen years old – an increase of 180 percent since 1970.”<sup>264</sup> Those fathers who had primary custody of their children underwent a transformation during the 1970s akin to the changes single mothers experienced.

Single fathers challenged the assumption that children needed a female mother in order to flourish and grow. They worked against long-standing definitions of masculinity,

<sup>263</sup> Ruth Dougherty, “Fathers with Custody: The Most Rapidly Increasing Trend in Single Parenthood Today,” *Parents Magazine* (1977), 88.

<sup>264</sup> Geoffrey Greif, *Single Fathers* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, D.C. Heath and Company, 1985), 3.

redefining manhood through their nurturing fatherhood. As part of the vanguard of single parenthood, fathers unexpectedly helped transform motherhood. Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, single fathers proved that men could mother.

Single mothers and fathers had a great deal in common. Both groups were in the vanguard of their society, challenging stereotypes and creating a new space in society for single parents. They faced similar challenges and experienced the joys of parenthood. Single mothers struggled with problems of survival - lack of affordable housing, child care, low-paying jobs, difficulty collecting child support, and negative social attitudes. Single fathers, in contrast, found themselves facing a different set of challenges. Fathers who gained full custody of their children after divorce, whose wives abandoned them, or who became single fathers through the death of their spouse, typically felt challenges at home and difficulties in the workplace. Both research studies and men's testimony showed that the fathers often dealt with an initial learning curve in figuring out how to run the household efficiently. After several months, however, most fathers felt fairly confident with their housekeeping solutions.

Some single fathers faced a greater difficulty in negotiating balanced work-life responsibilities. The common workplace ethos assumed men had wives at home to support them and take care of children. Other single fathers found it relatively easy to create flexible work arrangements. Single fathers often did not face as great a social stigma as single mothers, but they also were not seen as deserving of the same level of social support. Most government agencies assumed single fathers could cope on their own and offered little or no help. When managing the difficulties that single fatherhood brought, many men made choices that prioritized the care work they performed for their

children, despite the negative consequences in a male world. As fathers' rights groups began to form at the end of the decade, single fathers utilized feminist rhetoric in order to advocate for shared child-rearing and greater equality in custody arrangements.

So who were the single fathers of the seventies? Geoffrey Greif's research from the early 1980s showed that, on average, fathers were about 40 years old and married for 12 years before divorces; they were sole parents for about 4 years.<sup>265</sup> In one in six single-father-headed families, the father had custody of the children because his wife deserted the family. The second most frequent reason given for men having custody was that the children preferred to live with the father. These fathers were seen to provide better security, financial or emotional support. Greif used the example of Henry, a 50 year old police man. He was married for 30 years before he finally initiated divorce proceedings against his wife who was an alcoholic. "His two-teenage sons wanted to live with him while his daughter wanted to stay with her mother. No one objected. But it is not always that easy."<sup>266</sup> Greif noted that even in Henry's case, where the wife was suffering from alcoholism, his ability to gain full custody of his children hinged on the fact that she did not object to their sons' desires to live with their father.

Greif's research shows that the majority of fathers with custody after divorce actively fought for full parental rights. The conditions under which single fathers came into their situations may have affected their outlook on their ability to be successful parents and been a factor in their decision-making processes. The fact that some fathers *chose* to be single fathers may have influenced their overall attitude toward the endeavor.

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<sup>265</sup> Geoffrey L. Greif, "Dad Raising Kids," *Single Parent* (Dec. 1982) 19. The Women's Library, Fathers With Custody, 1982-87, 7HEF/02/03

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

One study found that: "Fathers who fought for custody report better relationships with their youngest child than do other respondents."<sup>267</sup> Like their female counterparts, single fathers in the '70s and early '80s underwent a shift in how they viewed their parental role and questioned what it meant to be a good parent. Single fathers took on the nurturing role of mother and often found great joy and meaning in the work of care, despite the obvious drawbacks of which female mothers complained, such as the lack of time, frustration, and loneliness.

Even those fathers who did not have a choice about their single parenthood seemed to be affected by new ideas about the value of the care work of parenting. Widowers and deserted husbands faced emotional trauma upon the loss of their spouse, but oftentimes redirected their focus on the job of caring for their children. Vice President Joe Biden was a widower raising his sons from 1972 to 1977 after his wife and daughter died in car crash. Biden was newly elected to the Senate at the time and took the Senate oath of office at his sons' bedside in 1973. In an ABC News interview with Diane Sawyer, Biden explained that, "Being a single parent is hard. I couldn't afford to have someone take care of my kids. But I had my mother, my brothers, my sister — I had a family that just took care of me." His sister moved in to help care for the children. Biden made the decision to commute daily to the capitol from his home in Delaware. "My being home every day was sort of the touchstone for me. And even though all three of my kids now are out and they're grown up, I still go home every day," he said.<sup>268</sup> While the Biden family's case might seem an extreme example, it highlights some themes of the gender

<sup>267</sup> Barbara Resman, "Can Men 'Mother'?: Life as a Single Father," *Family Relations* vol. 35, no. 1 *The Single Parent Family* (Jan. 1986) 101.

<sup>268</sup> Joe Biden interview with Diane Sawyer, [http://abcnews.go.com/WN/Whols/joe-biden/story?id=3770445&page=2#\\_UI0z7m\\_R63Y](http://abcnews.go.com/WN/Whols/joe-biden/story?id=3770445&page=2#_UI0z7m_R63Y), Accessed September 15, 2012.

differences inherent in single parenting. As a single father and tragic widow, Biden garnered sympathy and offers of help from his family. That his sister was willing and able to move into his home and take over some of the daily responsibilities may have been equally rare. However, it was typical that single fathers received similar offers for help with child-minding, cooking, and cleaning, often from well-meaning family and friends. According to an early guide for single parents, “the widowed parent was generally considered to be the responsibility of his or her family” and “[i]t was understood that the female relatives of the family would care for the widower’s children.”<sup>269</sup>

Biden was able to continue his work in the Senate because of these family-support systems. His decision to commute to Washington every day, however, reflected some changes happening in the mindset of single fathers during these decades. They saw the work of caring for their children as important as being a good breadwinner in successful parenting and were not willing as willing to sacrifice one for the other. Single fathers worked to find balance. One single father remarked, “Women may be tired of being regarded, culturally, as housekeepers and diaper washers; well, I’m tired of being culturally regarded as a breadwinner whose prime responsibility to the family is to be a ‘good provider.’ Meaning money.”<sup>270</sup> Another widower, Henry, had owned his own bakery, but gave up his business because the hours were too long. He took a job in a limousine service in order to be available to his children more. This was especially important to Henry because he lived far away from his family and only had neighbors to rely upon: “Not that you should depend upon relatives. But it would have been a comfort

<sup>269</sup> Jim Egleson and Janet Frank Egleson, *Parents Without Partners: A Guide for Divorced, Widowed, or Separated Parents* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1961), 17.

<sup>270</sup> Eliot A. Daley, *Father Feelings* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1978), 110.

for the boys to have some aunts and uncles around, at first especially.”<sup>271</sup> These widowers made the conscious decision to step into the nurturing mother role as single fathers, emphasizing time with their children and making changes to their professional lives.

Because of the great disparity in wages between men and women, single-father headed families typically had an economic advantage over those headed by single mothers. But, not all single fathers held well-paid jobs and not all single fathers were willing or able to find help with housekeeping and childcare. In Australia, for example, the 1971 Census showed 25,000 motherless families, but the only government financial assistance routinely available to a man supporting his children alone was child endowment. Child endowment was a weekly payment made to mothers for children under the age of sixteen, legislated under the Child Endowment Act of 1941. Typically, single supporting fathers could not get a pension because they were considered “employable.” They also were generally ineligible for maintenance, because they were considered “wage earners.” There were no tax-deductions for housekeepers or child care fees. Special benefits, with strict qualifying limits and restrictions on part-time income, might have been temporarily available, but they were nowhere near as lucrative as the supporting mothers’ benefit routinely given to deserted wives.<sup>272</sup> Those single fathers who could not afford adequate child care or who actively wanted to stay home and provide primary care for their children found it almost impossible to find financial assistance. Welfare agencies simply did not consider single fathers as needy.

<sup>271</sup> Ruth Dougherty, “Fathers with Custody: The Most Rapidly Increasing Trend in Single Parenthood Today,” *Parents Magazine* (1977), 88.

<sup>272</sup> Council for the Single Mother and Her Child, “A Fair Start for Every Child,” (Victoria, Australia: CSMC, August 1975) 14. The Women’s Library NCUMC box.



In the United States, the welfare system was overwhelmingly organized around the mother as custodial parent. One father, Jerry, was unable to even apply for assistance in his own name: “my AFDC case [had] to be filed in my wife’s name. It is always filed in the mother’s name, I was informed.”<sup>273</sup> In an article in *Momma*, Jerry described a series of bureaucratic nightmares, the likes of which single mothers had testified about for years. He felt that many of the problems he faced, however, were because the system was not set up to accommodate a single father. He said, “I felt like a heretic during the Inquisition. My heresy? I was employed, seeking welfare and, most critically, I was a man.”<sup>274</sup> Navigating the confusing processes established by the state to qualify for assistance was certainly problematic when the state itself did not recognize single fathers as possible candidates for welfare. One social worker from the era declared, “The human-service agencies aren’t geared for father support. It is imperative...for the traditionally female-oriented social-service agencies to reassess and, where appropriate, adjust their programs to help unwed or single fathers.”<sup>275</sup>

Despite the institutional prejudice, it does not appear that having more money automatically made single fathers happier or better single parents. One study explained that, “Overall, a father’s economic status affects his role as a single parent primarily on instrumental tasks. But, unlike research conducted in other countries, social class does not seem to be a particularly important determinant of an American man’s satisfaction with single fatherhood.”<sup>276</sup> In this study, social class, which was primarily described by

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<sup>273</sup> Jerry McKenna, “Welfare: It’s a Man’s World,” *Momma: The newspaper/magazine for single mothers v.1, no. 5* (May 1973), 20.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 100

the person's income, seemed to play a role in determining a single father's feelings of adequacy as a solo parent. Other research has shown that men appeared to be more fulfilled by the care work they provided, regardless of their economic situation. They were able to experience a new kind of bonding with their children, brought on by the situation. As one single father recalled, "We were not very close before... it's drawn me and the boys much closer together. We are very close now. They don't see their mother very much."<sup>277</sup> Spending more time with their children and being responsible for their children's emotional well-being brought many single fathers closer to them. Alec, a working-class single father from Luton, England, came to realize that the "most precious thing you can give is time. It doesn't matter what hour, if they've [his children] got a problem, they come and see me."<sup>278</sup> Single fathers from across the spectrum of life began to recalibrate their ideas about gender roles, the value of housework, happiness, and fatherhood. Alec made a huge transformation. He described himself as somewhat of a male chauvinist before his marriage, but, as a single parent, he not only changed his point of view about what made him a good father, but shifted his ideals about what would make his sons good men. Alec said of the divorce's effect on his sons: "I actually think this has been good for them. My boys have friends who can't even cook a meal. I mean some of those boys can't even cook a beefburger. Both my boys can do that. They can cook, dress, and they're both in Scouts... That boy [his eldest son] would survive anywhere. I mean he can take care of himself, and the young one is going the same way now."<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Catherine Itzin, *Splitting Up: Single-Parent Liberation* (London, Virago, 1980), 38.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

Alec talked about cooking and dressing oneself - being able to perform housework that mothers traditionally took care of - as the measure of being independent.

The rise in single fatherhood coincided with a shift in the ideology of fatherhood, as more men embraced the nurturing aspects of care work associated with parenting. One contemporary father noted, "These are welcome changes. They seem to indicate that fathers are coming into their own. Not only is society readjusting its values but daddies themselves are recognizing that they have responsibilities in child-rearing, responsibilities they welcome and delight in."<sup>280</sup> It is possible that new social mores about fatherhood helped prompt more divorced fathers to actively seek custody of their children, or at least to head into the undertaking with a positive outlook of the task ahead. Feminists in the women's liberation movement had been calling for greater male involvement in the care work of parenting since the late 1960s. By the mid-'70s, it seemed that some single fathers had identified with these messages of gender equality between mothers and fathers. One single father urged others to, "take to the role of custodial parent with pride and realize we are simply doing what our sisters had to do for years... and they probably received less sympathy and compassion that we get."<sup>281</sup> Many Feminist fathers saw the benefit of gender equality in parenting, despite the difficulties it meant.

One question debated throughout these transformative years was whether or not men could "mother." Single fathers faced the gargantuan task of trying to fill that sacred social role with the distinct disadvantage of not being female. For many, this seemed an

<sup>280</sup> James Breig, *How To Be A Good Father* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1976), 9.

<sup>281</sup> Geoffrey L. Greif, "Dad Raising Kids," *Single Parent* (Dec. 1982) 20. The Women's Library, Fathers With Custody, 1982-87, 7HEF/02/03

insurmountable problem. They saw women, by nature, as the more nurturing sex, and some argued that men simply could not perform the care work of mothers. This view of women tied motherhood biologically to the female sex as it made the act of nurturing somehow linked to the biological function of procreation. In general, proponents of this view tended to believe that because women bore and nursed infants that they were physiologically more adept at providing emotional care for children.<sup>282</sup> A sociological study of single fathers in the 1970s explained that, “for married man in modern society, the qualities of being a ‘good husband’ have been similar to those of being a ‘good father.’ The good father-husband is an economic provider.”<sup>283</sup> The study revealed that, in addition to this very strict definition of fatherhood, men also faced the “very strong cultural bias that woman, biologically, psychologically, and temperamentally, are best suited for child care and that mothering rather than parenting is the primary ingredient in child development.”<sup>284</sup>

Men even admitted that they “felt badly prepared for their new roles” as single fathers, and “researchers conclude[d] that because men grow up not expecting to care for children, most lack[ed] the necessary experience and information to do the job right.”<sup>285</sup> Social scientists studying these questions found that, “Although mothers are currently expected to shoulder primary responsibility for childrearing, structuralism suggests that when responsibility is shifted to fathers, men will adopt those behaviors which have traditionally been considered mothering.”<sup>286</sup> Using the theory of structuralism

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<sup>282</sup> Richard A. Lippa, *Gender, Nature, and Nurture* (London: Psychology Press, 2005), 81.

<sup>283</sup> Harry Finkelstein Keshet and Kristine M. Rosenthal, “Single Parent Fathers: New Study,” *Children Today* v. 7 (1978), 13-14.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>285</sup> Jody Gaylin, “Single Father is Doing Well,” *Psychology Today* v. 10 (1977), 36.

<sup>286</sup> Barbara Risman, “Can Men ‘Mother’?: Life As a Single Father”, *Family Relations* vol. 35, no. 1 (Jan., 1986),96.

and examining how the institution of motherhood was constructed, researchers interpreted that it was not the individual person in the role that defined it, i.e. women and mothers. Men could *learn* how to nurture and care for children when put into the role, like single fathers.

It is clear from single dads' testimony that men "mothered" differently than women. As noted in earlier chapters, some single mothers experimented during these years with alternative parenting styles, like family meetings and a linear power structure. Men, in contrast, continued to rely on command, like traditional fathers. Single-father-headed households operated much like two-parent households, with the adult parent at the top of the hierarchy and the minor children below. Single dad Eliot Daley remembered his thoughts on the topic:

They *are* still children. And I want them to know that. And, until they are adults, we who are will exercise some parental prerogatives... [this] includes making some less-than-democratic decisions about a whole covey of affairs, from bedtime to practice schedules for piano, to allowances, to church participation.<sup>287</sup>

Daley remained the figure of authority over his family. In his mind, his "parental prerogatives" included his ability to dictate to the children what their duties to the family would be. Ultimately, he accepted responsibility as the parent. Daley did not, however, see himself as a despot. He encouraged communication with the children: "I do listen to their opinions, and to their feelings. But decisions are not made by consensus, in matters where their development as children is concerned. In the matters where they are clearly *children*, the adults will decide."<sup>288</sup> Daley maintained a more traditional parenting stance.

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<sup>287</sup> Eliot Daley, *Father Feelings* (New York, William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1978), 95.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*

At the same time, he incorporated some lessons learned by other single parents about listening to his children's needs.

As we saw in previous chapters, there were some single mothers who had difficulty maintaining boundaries between themselves as parents and their children. In those cases, their efforts to create more egalitarian family units broke down the parent-child relationship. For single fathers, this seemed to happen less frequently. Many of the testimonies of single fathers reinforced the continued practice of top-down parenting by fathers, despite the fact that most single-parent families shared work among family members more often than two-parent families. Single father Don expected his seven-year-old daughter Heather to help with the housework: "She is little yet, but I encourage her to take responsibility. She helps me fold the laundry, makes her bed, and helps when I clean our rooms. She also likes to set the table for Aunt Jean."<sup>289</sup> According to Don, little Heather would learn how to become a nurturing mother and wife as well as become more disciplined and obedient due to Don's traditional fathering. Any number of reasons could exist about how and why single fathers continued to parent more traditionally than single mothers. While we need further research, continued male dominance in the workforce and political hierarchy, religious conservatism among fathers, backlash against the women's movement, and male psychological biases provide reasons why single male parents maintained traditional patterns.

Even though society responded more sympathetically to single fathers than to single mothers, there continued to be stereotypes and long-held beliefs about single fathers' incompetence. In a sociological study of single parent households, Dr. Robert S.

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<sup>289</sup> Ruth Dougherty, "Fathers with Custody: The Most Rapidly Increasing Trend in Single Parenthood Today," *Parents Magazine* v. 52 (1977), 90.

Weiss maintained the advantages of being married while parenting: “help when help is necessary; support, understanding, and, in general, emotional sustenance; and a sharing of responsibility for the well-being of the family.”<sup>290</sup> Most of his study focused on the difficulties of single parenting, without showing the positive outcomes many single parents achieved. Despite its bias, the study provides an example of how dimly single fathers were viewed. Social norms expected men to be incapable of mothering. Weiss insisted that, “Men who become single parents seem much more likely than women to contract out home maintenance tasks, to hire a housekeeper or cleaning woman or to enlist as volunteer help a mother or sister or mother-in-law. Men, more easily than women, can plead incompetence; they can claim that their wives have always dealt with the shopping and cooking and cleaning.”<sup>291</sup> While it was true that men were more likely than women to hire household help, the reason was not because men were incompetent. It was because men in the 1970s made substantially more money than women. More single fathers than single mothers could afford to hire help. Single fathers were far from incapable. When the situation called for it, they rose to the challenge of performing the wife and mother roles with great aplomb. Single father Henry explained the ease with which he and his sons acclimated to housekeeping: “To manage the household without a mother, Henry and his sons naturally turned to the things each preferred. Henry had always enjoyed cooking... the younger son, Marty, has turned out to be the housekeeper; he does the laundry and housecleaning. Herman, the older son, shares the gardening and grass-cutting with his father. ‘We seem to know what needs to be done without any

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<sup>290</sup> Robert S. Weiss, *Going It Alone: The Family Life and Social Situation of the Single Parent* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1979), 61.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

fuss,' Henry told [the interviewer]."<sup>292</sup> Men could mother when given the opportunity to learn how and when they had the desire to fulfill the role.

Despite the reports by single fathers that the shift to single parenting happened relatively smoothly, we should not underestimate the ways in which single fatherhood challenged traditional stereotypes of fatherhood. As we have seen, single mothers challenged gender stereotypes of motherhood established in the post-World War II years and reinforced by the subsequent Baby Boom. Single fatherhood began a reexamination of fatherhood and what it meant to be a dad. For mothers, biology played a large part in defining womanhood. Because women bore children, their primary was closely tied to reproduction and the physical acts associated with child-rearing. Women and children were physically close. Men, on the other hand, over time became physically distant from children; men spent much of their time at work, away from their children. Criticism of this separation of fathers from their children focused on the damaging effects on children. Too much time with mothers produced unbalanced, weak, spoiled children. Fathers were needed to "counteract the overabundance of maternal care" and prevent their children from becoming "sissies".<sup>293</sup> The care that fathers provided, however, did not typically require nurturing or housework. Fathers' jobs usually included repairing things around the house, playing games and sports, and, of course, discipline. When parenting magazines of the 1950s gave fathers advice on how to be a more active parent, they did not suggest helping out with the laundry or making lunches every morning. Instead, typical articles instructed that, "A man can be a success as a father, a real 'dad', if he

<sup>292</sup> Ruth Dougherty, "Fathers with Custody: The Most Rapidly Increasing Trend in Single Parenthood Today," *Parents Magazine* v. 52 (1977), 88.

<sup>293</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988, 2008), 139.



cares enough to try... Share your small son's hobbies, laugh at his jokes, lend a listening ear to his problems, the kind of things a fellow wants to talk over with a man."<sup>294</sup> The main job of dads in the postwar nuclear family seemed to be modelling what it meant to be a "real man".

What did it mean to be a "real man"? By the 1970s, definitions of masculinity had begun to change. In the same way that Baby Boomer women began to question female gender roles, men of the age expanded traditional expectations of manliness. Author and political activist Barbara Ehrenreich described the changes in masculinity during these decades in *The Hearts of Men*. She noted that educators and psychologists began to identify the problems with sex-role stereotyping for men in the '70s. As one newsletter for teachers explained, "The American Male – brave, courageous, and bold... He's the provider. He's the bedrock of the American family. He learns to repress emotions like fear, insecurity, compassion which leads to tears, and a certain kind of sensitivity allowed to be felt by women only."<sup>295</sup> Being a "real man" in the 1950's sense could have negative consequences not only for men, but for society at large. Change was required.

As Ehrenreich argues, the main result in the shedding of stereotypical "breadwinner" male sex roles was the further separation of men from the family. Men, she explains, experimented with moral vagrancy, focusing on self-gratification and engaging in behaviors that removed them, physically and fiscally, from women and children. Ehrenreich mentions single-father headed families only briefly and in passing to note that their numbers were small, implying they were inconsequential. The most

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>295</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1983), 125.

important factor of the rising divorce rate of the 1970s, she claims, is that “men become singles and women become single mothers.”<sup>296</sup> While this argument is important and largely true, dismissing single fathers so quickly fails to take into account some of the positive effects of the challenge to gender stereotypes of the decade. By turning their backs on the “breadwinner only” male gender role of fatherhood, single fathers expanded their notions of fatherhood to include emotional and physical care of children as well as housework. The definition of being a good dad meant going beyond the advice of the fifties where dad was seen as a great “pal.”

As the divorce rate continued to rise during the 1970s, the number of fathers seeking full or joint custody of their children increased as well. Almost all of them faced serious discrimination at the hands of judges during the no-fault divorce era. One man described his experience in these words:

I went through hell during my divorce. My wife got herself an expensive lawyer who made it an adversary situation from the beginning rather than trying to work anything out. I suddenly found that I was no longer being related to as a human being, but as a bank statement, a profit-and-loss statement. I was reduced to assets and nothing more. That really hurt me a lot, the impersonality of the whole thing.<sup>297</sup>

Social assumptions about gender roles and the division of labor in families set the stage for adversarial divorces. Women were viewed by lawyers and judges as the logical caretakers of the children and almost always awarded full custody. Men were seen as breadwinners given minimal visitation rights in return for child support. Typically, judges

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>297</sup> *Momma: The Sourcebook for Single Mothers*, 343.

gave fathers one afternoon during the week to visit their children and every other weekend to keep them overnight.<sup>298</sup>

One common result was the detachment of fathers from their children. Non-custodial fathers felt that they had no place in their children's lives. Men often remarried and focused their time and financial support on their new families. The adversarial divorce process placed both parties in a state of animosity. It was not uncommon for mothers to withhold visitation as a form of punishment against fathers and for fathers to stop paying child support in return. Single mother Gail admitted that she felt like she was given the ultimate responsibility over the children in her divorce and that she was "the Parent": "So I did not push when he didn't see them as often as he should. I only contacted him when we needed money. And he responded by giving me none. The drums of battle could be heard in the distance."<sup>299</sup> In many ways, the entire system of divorce and custody encouraged fathers to abandon their old families and start anew.

By the beginning of the 1980s, fathers came to the realization that the system was working against them; and a growing movement for fathers' rights emerged. Fathers' rights groups formed in many of the same countries dealing with challenges arising from the growth of single parenthood: the United States, Europe, and Australia in particular. About 200 fathers' rights groups were known to exist by the end of the 1970s, with about 10,000 members. Some of the most prominent groups in the U.S. were Fathers United for Equal Rights, Divorced Dads, and Father's and Children's Equality (FACE).<sup>300</sup> Groups

<sup>298</sup> This continues to be a "standard" custody arrangement in divorce cases where one parent has primary custody of the children.

<sup>299</sup> Dorothy O'Connor, "Co-Parenting," *Momma: The Sourcebook for Single Mothers*, 330.

<sup>300</sup> Catherine Foster, "Plea for Father's Rights: Divorced but Still a Dad," *The Christian Science Monitor* (July 6, 1982), Michigan State University Special Collections.

such as these formed primarily to address the challenges divorced fathers faced in the legal system. One national catalogue described the groups' activities, explaining that, "Members of such groups lobby their state legislature to achieve fundamental reforms in divorce and custody laws... Many fathers' rights organizations publish newsletters, mount letter-writing campaigns, hold regular meetings, identify sympathetic judges, make referrals to those attorneys who advocate fathers' rights position, and counsel their members through all phases of the divorce process."<sup>301</sup> Just as some women's rights groups focused first on political and legal equality for women as an avenue of change, so too did fathers' rights groups look to the judicial system to address the inequalities single fathers experienced.

In addition to advocating for increased custody of their children, fathers' rights groups brought to light many additional issues not being addressed by the legal system. Fathers' rights groups were often made up of divorced fathers who felt they had been mistreated by the institutions responsible for divorce cases, from judges and lawyers to social workers and the Internal Revenue System. Groups advocated changes that would allow fathers back into the lives of children of divorced parents, in whatever way suited the families. Not all fathers demanded full custody, but for those who did, fathers' rights groups played an important role in changing not only the laws themselves, but the nature of custody cases. In addition to custody, fathers' rights groups pushed for an awareness of the problem of "visitation interference," when a mother with primary custody interfered with the father's visitation rights. According to the President of Dad's, Inc., a fathers' rights group active in the 1980s, "Visitation interference is an enormous national problem,

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<sup>301</sup> Debra G. Klinman, *Fatherhood U.S.A.: The First National Guide to Programs, Services, and Resources for and about Fathers* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), 154.

equal in scope to the support collection problem. Many times, the two are related.”<sup>302</sup> Dad’s, Inc., wanted to pass laws that punished mothers who interfered with visitation and demanded judges start compelling mothers to comply. Judge Donald R. Freeman, a judge in the Seventh Judicial Circuit Court in Flint, Michigan, was hailed a hero by Dad’s, Inc. for jailing a mother who refused to allow visitation by her ex-husband. The judge found Donna Ureche guilty of criminal contempt and sentenced her to 10 days in the county jail. Judge Freeman explained his decision as an effort to reduce “friction” in child custody cases and heard the pleas of single fathers who had begun demanding time with their children.<sup>303</sup>

While the advantages of co-parenting or joint custody seemed obvious to many single fathers, they faced serious opposition from both individual women and the legal system. Mothers did not want to lose some of the only power they believed they had in the divorce process, i.e. control of their children. Faced with primarily male judges and male attorneys and a lack of resources, women felt at a distinct disadvantage during divorce. Some feminist groups did not support fathers’ rights or joint custody. As reported in the *Christian Science Monitor*, “The New York chapter of NOW... lobbied against the join-custody bill later vetoed by Gov. Hugh Carey because it ‘mandated joint custody by the judge,’ rather than allowing free choice by both parents.”<sup>304</sup> And in California, the *Divorced Dads’ Newsletter* reported, “Governor [Jerry] Brown unwittingly assured his own defeat when he followed the advice of his feminist advisers and vetoes a shared child-

<sup>302</sup>“Letter to Judge Freeman”, CEC Dads, Inc., October 12, 1982. Michigan State University Special Collections

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

<sup>304</sup> Catherine Foster, “Plea for Father’s Rights: Divorced But Still A Dad,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (Tuesday, July 6, 1982), Michigan State University Special Collections.

custody bill just before the election.”<sup>305</sup> Feminist groups lobbied legislatures to make sure that these joint-custody laws were vetoed in order to protect what they viewed was an assault on mothers’ rights in the divorce process. Additionally, individual women were hesitant to agree to join custody because of the stigma against mothers giving up even a small portion of control over their children. Women often were condemned by their family and friends for agreeing to anything less than sole custody. Their ability to mother was questioned, so they sought sole custody during the divorce.<sup>306</sup> However, fathers’ rights organizations saw the attack on joint-custody legislation as part of a larger agenda by feminist groups against men. The growing political power of feminist organizations like the National Organization for Women led fathers’ rights groups to consider them as adversaries. In some cases, this adversarial relationship was justified.<sup>307</sup>

Within the divorce process, fathers not only dealt with aggressive behavior from ex-spouses, but they also faced social suspicion, even by judges. A survey of judges identified at least five considerations when making custodial arrangements. Along with financial stability and ability to provide adequate time, included in the list was the question of “gender placement. Specifically, should fathers be given custody of daughters?”<sup>308</sup> Society reacted so strongly and negatively to the idea of a single father raising girls without their mothers that even judges were wary about placing girls into their father’s custody. One case, touted by fathers’ rights activists as a landmark case that proved,

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<sup>305</sup> George Partis, “Father Power,” *Divorced Dads Newsletter* (January 1983), 2. Michigan State University Special Collection.

<sup>306</sup> “Can Mothers Attain Freedom of Choice Vis-à-Vis Joint Custody?” *Marriage and Divorce Today* v.8, n. 4 (August 30, 1982), 3 reprinted in *Divorced Dads Newsletter* (January 1983), 6. Michigan State University Special Collections.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>308</sup> “The Single Father and Child Custody,” *The Washington Post*, reprinted in the *Divorced Dads Newsletter* (February 1983), 3. Michigan State University Special Collections.

“that even where very young daughters, and a wife that is not ‘unfit’ are involved, a father can win custody,”<sup>309</sup> was a good example of the embedded distrust of fathers. In this particular case, the father, Mr. Clark, was awarded custody of his two daughters under three years of age because his own mother, the paternal grandmother of the girls, would be the primary caregiver. The ruling was clear that it was the involvement of the grandmother that swayed the case in favor of the father. Inherent in the decision was the implication that Clark needed the assistance of a mother, in this case his own mother, to help him adequately raise two young daughters.

“Gender placement” vexed judges because of the bias against fathers, the feeling that men could not properly relate to female offspring. Even single fathers confessed to having these feelings of inadequacy. In his memoirs, *Confessions of a Single Father*, Jim Covington remembered: “I had already thought about the pre-adolescent years and wondered how I would talk to my daughter about her sexual development. At a stage in her life when she would be acutely aware of her developing sexuality, how could I be of help to her without overstimulating the situation? Obviously, my own discomfort about her developing sexuality was beginning to stir.”<sup>310</sup> There was a general understanding at the time that “girls needed their mothers”, or at least an adult female, in order to navigate the challenges of puberty. The social consensus was that men could not help young girls mature into womanhood and that even men felt inadequate. There also existed a deep-seated fear of child molestation or incest. Jim Covington described his struggle living with his sexually maturing daughter as “dangerous.” He felt “frightened” by her need for

<sup>309</sup> “Another Dad Wins Custody in Missouri,” *Divorced Dads Newsletter* (March 1983), 3. Michigan State University Special Collections.

<sup>310</sup> Jim Covington, *Confessions of a Single Father* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1982), 92.

sexualized attention. It was difficult for fathers to overcome both obvious and hidden gender discrimination when suing for custody of their daughters.<sup>311</sup>

Despite the many challenges and discrimination single fathers faced because they were men, male privilege also helped single fathers be more successful at heading a single parent family than their female counterparts. We have already seen how single fathers did not face the social stigma against single parenthood in the same way that women did. Single fathers did not face housing discrimination and often had more offers of assistance from friends and family than single mothers. The workplace was much kinder to single fathers than single mothers. Because of the gender gap in wages, men already earned more money than women. White House analysts concluded that, “After hovering at about 60 percent since the mid-1950s, the ratio of women's to men's median pay began to rise in the late 1970s and [only] reached about 70 percent by 1990.”<sup>312</sup>

Even beyond salary, employers seemed more inclined to help single fathers than single mothers. Single mothers often worried about being fired from their jobs if their childcare responsibilities interfered with their jobs. Women were fired for taking time off to care for sick children or for arriving late or leaving early to accommodate child care. Employers seemed more willing to provide men with more flexible work arrangements, allowing them to cut back hours, rearrange their schedules, work from home, or take time off for parenting. One single father, Chuck, worked as a civil engineer for the City of New York. He decided that he did not want a babysitter for his son after the boy got out of kindergarten at 3:00 p.m. As reported in *Momma*, “Chuck... wanted

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> *Explaining Trends in the Gender Wage Gap: A Report by the Council of Economic Advisers*, The White House, June 1998, Accessed August 22, 2015, <http://clinton4.nara.gov/WH/EOP/CEA/html/gendergap.html>



him to come home every day to a family. Since he works in the field, and has a certain quota of work to do each day, he made an arrangement with his employer which allowed him to leave work at 3:00 as long as his work was done.”<sup>313</sup> Another father, a junior partner at a law firm, reduced his hours at the office from twelve to six. He realized that “I didn’t have to be in the office for most of what I do. Most of the time I am on the phone talking to clients for dictating to a tape recorder.”<sup>314</sup> He admitted that his firm might be “particularly understanding.” He also felt that if single fatherhood became more common, then more businesses would have to become more understanding.

Both of these fathers had professional-level jobs which were not available to most single mothers in the 1970s and 1980s. They were not tied to a desk, like many female workers in the pink collar sector of the labor force. They were able to complete their work on their own terms. Flexible working schedules, paternity leave, and employer-sponsored educational programs all helped working single fathers balance their work and family responsibilities. One study concluded that, “employers and workers alike are becoming increasingly aware of the role strain experienced by responsible employees who also happen to be involved, caring parents.”<sup>315</sup> Many forward thinking companies recognized that workers were more productive when facing less stress and had more work-life balance. The vast majority of companies, however, failed to make employee satisfaction a priority; and these programs, which single parents need, continued to be offered at only select places of employment.

<sup>313</sup> Dorothy O’Connor, “Chuck Rollins” *Momma: The Newspaper/Magazine for Single Mothers* no. 1, v. 5 (May 1973), 6.

<sup>314</sup> Michael McFadden and Richard Mathison, “Single Fathers: The Other Side of the Coin...” *Momma: The Newspaper/Magazine for Single Mothers* v. 1, no. 5 (May 1973), 4.

<sup>315</sup> Debra G. Klinman, *Fatherhood U.S.A.: The First National Guide to Programs, Services, and Resources for and about Fathers* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), 185.

Just as changing social and economic opportunities made it possible for women to successfully head their households, so too did the changes in society make it more appealing for men to become single fathers. In particular, the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s made it easier for men to have fulfilling sex lives without the burden of getting married. Two single fathers, both writers, explained, "We are not looking for new mothers for our kids (they already have mothers who they see and like); we don't want to marry somebody we like (or don't like) just to have a cook and housekeeper." These men benefitted from the Sexual Revolution by being able to remain socially and sexually active without the burdensome responsibilities of commitment or marriage. They both agreed that, "with so many lovely women around, we don't need to buy a sexual partner or female companionship with a wedding ring and the promise of lifelong fidelity."<sup>316</sup>

Single fathers could have a fulfilling sex life without being tied to just one woman or, if they were dating someone, they did not feel the pressure to get married. This could be liberating for some fathers, making single fatherhood easier, but it was also new territory for others. Single fathers navigated the new rules of dating and sexuality in the context of their new father-headed families and had to learn as they went along. Single dad Jim Covington felt overwhelmed sometimes when he saw how far his life had changed from the traditional life he had planned for himself. "I never dreamed that one day I would be divorced, with custody of my children in New York City, living a single life, then living with another woman, unmarried, and not at all sure that she would always be there," he confessed.<sup>317</sup> Things had changed so quickly in his lifetime that possibilities

<sup>316</sup> Michael McFadden and Richard Mathison, "Single Fathers: The Other Side of the Coin..." *Momma: The newspaper/magazine for single mothers* v. 1, no. 5 (May 1973), 4.

<sup>317</sup> Jim Covington, *Confessions of a Single Father* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1982), 89.

existed for a lifestyle Jim could not have imagined when he married at eighteen. He had invited his girlfriend of three months to move in with him and his children, something which would have been shocking only a decade before.

Like single mothers, single fathers often turned to single parent organizations to help them meet new partners. One single father newsletter recommended Parents Without Partners, because, "PWP is a non-threatening environment to meet unattached ladies, young and old, who are as committed to family life as you are... Most PWP men, however, do not have custody, which makes you, as a Single Dad, an unusual and interesting guy."<sup>318</sup> The implication was that, because single fathers had sole custody of their children, they had an advantage on the dating scene over a dad who only had visitation. Single dads could also meet women at the plethora of singles bars operating in the '70s and '80s, through churches, friends, or other organizations, or they could utilize the growing personal ads published in newspapers. One publication, *Single Scene*, had a section called "Single File," where single parents could post personal ads. Single dad Bob Hirschfeld praised the service highly and ended up meeting his second wife through the personal ads posted there. He preached the newspaper's worthiness, "I believed in Harlan's Single File ads; in the years that I both placed and responded to ads in his newspaper, I never met anyone other than nice, reasonable people."<sup>319</sup> Personal ads provided a way for single parents to meet other single parents, before the advent of the internet and online dating. While there were risks involved in meeting strangers, testimonials like Hirschfeld's above could go a long way in helping single parents meet "nice, reasonable people." Changing social mores meant that single fathers could create

<sup>318</sup> "Parents Without Partners," *Single Dad's Lifestyle* (March 1978), 5.

<sup>319</sup> Bob Hirschfeld, "Single File Encounter Ends Arm in Arm," *Single Dad's Lifestyle* (January 1980), 2.

the kind of lifestyle best suited to them, without the fear of lifelong celibacy or rushing straight into another marriage simply for the sake of decorum.

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, single fatherhood became more acceptable and normalized. America's consciousness about single fathers was raised by the 1979 movie *Kramer vs. Kramer*, in which Dustin Hoffman plays the role of Ted Kramer. He ends up with custody of his five-year old son, Billy, when his wife Joanna, played by Meryl Streep, leaves her marriage to get therapy and find employment so she can properly care for her child. Ted had little experience caring for Billy. He experiences a metamorphosis during the movie from a cold breadwinner into an affectionate father. When Joanna returns years later, sues for custody, and wins, Ted is devastated because of the newfound bond between him and Billy. Ultimately, Joanna decides that the best place for Billy is with his father, and she relinquishes custody at the end of the film.

Based on a novel by the same name, *Kramer vs. Kramer* was a cultural touchstone for single fatherhood. One single father heralded the movie as, "Superb... a finely honed, to the point motion picture that will undoubtedly do more to reach the consciousness of America with **Our Story**, my fellow Single Dads, than anything previously done in the media, in the courts, in the legislature, or in the publicity efforts of the Fathers' Rights movement."<sup>320</sup> *Kramer vs. Kramer* legitimized the experience of single fathers, largely at the expense of women. As Susan Faludi wrote in *Backlash*, one message of the movie was that feminism gave mothers "an excuse to run out on their responsibilities."<sup>321</sup> If women were going to run out on their domestic duties, then single fathers would find a

<sup>320</sup> Bob Hirshfeld, "Kramer vs. Kramer," *Single Dad's Lifestyle* (December 1979), 2. Michigan State University Special Collections.

<sup>321</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (NY: Doubleday, 1991), 264.

way to succeed at parenting alone. While single fathers had shown up on both the small screen and big screen for several decades in shows like *Father Knows Best*, *My Three Sons*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, and *Diff'rent Strokes*, the fathers were widowers. They usually had helping housekeepers or relatives to care for the children. Journalist Diane Shipley's analysis of pioneering single fathers on television concluded that, "A variation on the early trend for single fathers was for a man to foster or adopt (not always formally) a child in need, which was a quick way to foist responsibility on a character without giving him a sad backstory. (It would also presumably have seemed more heroic and far less scandalous than being divorced.) *Bachelor Father*, *Fury*, and *The Great Gildersleeve* all took this tack."<sup>322</sup> In terms of showing fathers as caregivers and taking on the mother role, *Kramer vs. Kramer* highlighted many of the real-life struggles and paved the way for movies like *Mr. Mom*, a 1983 comedy about a stay-at-home dad,<sup>323</sup> and television shows like *Who's the Boss?*, a 1984 sitcom where a high-powered divorcee hires a single father to be her housekeeper. Just as media performs the combined task of both reflecting society and helping to shape it, movies and television shows which portrayed single fathers as capable of mothering helped promote and normalize the real-life struggles and accomplishments of many single fathers.

As one single father of the 1970s concluded, "The ranks of single custodial fathers are swelling, aided by changing divorce laws, social mores, the feminist movement, and a growing recognition by single fathers that, beyond the obvious biological aspects of infant maternal dependence, a man is as legitimate a single parent as a woman."<sup>324</sup> Men

<sup>322</sup> Diane Shipley, "Daddy Issues: Pop Culture's Pioneering Single Dads," *Bitch Media*, December 28, 2012, <https://bitchmedia.org/post/daddy-issues-pop-cultures-pioneering-single-dads>.

<sup>323</sup> He was not divorced, but faced much of the same ignorance about childcare and housework as Ted Kramer.

<sup>324</sup> "From Dad's Pad," *Single Dad's Lifestyle* (February 1978), 3. Michigan State University Special Collections.

could and can mother. Fathers can learn how to perform all of the physical and psychological tasks related to child-rearing.

Like single mothers, single fathers challenged traditional social mores about parenthood. They organized into fathers' rights groups to press for social change and forced the recognition that gender bias about parenting and divorce was, in fact, hurting children. The changes wrought by the liberation of single parents from strict gender codes was nothing less than revolutionary:

What happens with splitting up is that just about every preconception about women and men, women's and men's roles, women's and men's capabilities are called into question in one fell swoop... It is a proposition with radical implications... The implications have been perhaps ignored, because it is a transaction which challenges fundamentally many of society's most fervently held beliefs and values: sexual role conditioning (eg. men out to do one thing, women out to do another), marriage, nuclear family values, childbearing and childrearing, education, work – basically the whole role of women and men in society.<sup>325</sup>

When fathers and mothers separated, they not only split up their own nuclear family, they broke apart the foundation of society. By splitting up and remaining unattached, single mothers and single fathers created a new kind of social building block, one that required long-standing norms about rights and responsibilities of each sex to be questioned.

It was no wonder that a conservative backlash began brewing around the same time that these new revolutionary ideas were taking root. The outcome of normalizing single parenthood, creating extended families of co-parents, and allowing people to form the kinds of work-life situations that were best for them must have seemed inconceivable to many. Single mothers' advocate Karol Hope praised the publicity surrounding single fatherhood: "Perhaps the advent of single fatherhood will demystify, once and for all, the

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<sup>325</sup> Catherine Itzin, *Splitting Up: Single-Parent Liberation* (London: Virago, 1980), 9.

assumptions that God provided men with 'male' capacities, women with 'female'. Perhaps we will see that indeed, to be human is simply to be human, that to raise children is simply a process best done by anyone interested in doing it."<sup>326</sup>

Single parenthood in the mid-'70s and early '80s revealed that single mothers and fathers chose to make the care work of parenting a priority in their lives. Many single parents considered their role as mother or father the most important job they held, and they sought out creative solutions to their everyday problems in order to fulfill their obligations. While single mothers and single fathers faced unique challenges, often due to the gendered structure of society, both sexes adapted by altering their definitions of good mothering and fathering. Social attitudes toward single parents also shifted in these decades, as the numbers of single-parent families continued to rise, and efforts were made to understand the challenges single parents faced.

In 1984, President Ronald Reagan proclaimed March 21 as National Single Parent Day. He said, "I call on the people of the United States to recognize the contributions single parents are making, sometimes under great hardships, to the lives of their children, and I ask that they volunteer their help, privately or through community organizations, to single parents who seek it to meet their aspirations for their children.... Single parents can and do provide children with the financial, physical, emotional, and social support they need to take their places as productive and mature citizens. With the active interest and support of friends, relatives, and local communities, they can do even more to raise their children in the best possible environment."<sup>327</sup> Reagan acknowledged the hardships

<sup>326</sup> Karol Hope, "Demystifying the Single Father Experience," *Momma: The newspaper/magazine for single mothers* v 1, no 5 (May 1973), 3.

<sup>327</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Proclamation 5166 – National Single Parent Day* (21 March 1984).

faced by single parent families and called for new view of society, which included single parent families.<sup>328</sup> With the endorsement of this most conservative of Republican Presidents, it would seem that single parents in America had carved out a permanent place.

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<sup>328</sup> This can be read to pertain mainly to white American families. Reagan infamously disregarded black single mothers in his 1976 campaign speeches when he dubbed them “welfare queens.”



## CHAPTER 6 SEX, CHOICE, AND CHILDREN

*“Marriage may have its thorns, I read somewhere, but celibacy has no roses.”<sup>329</sup>*

-Single mother Carol Lynn Pearson

The rise in single motherhood of the 1970s coincided with the sexual revolution, bringing a relaxed sexual code and a more egalitarian approach to dating and sex. The combination of these changes forced single mothers to reevaluate their own sexuality vis à vis motherhood and marriage. During the 1970s and 1980s, white, middle-class single mothers whether divorced, widowed, unmarried, or otherwise raising children without a partner had to decide where and how their sex lives would fit into their role as primary caregiver. Individual mothers had to assess their situations and come up with a plan that best fit with their own and their children’s needs. Some mothers actively wanted to date in order to remarry. Others had no intention of remarrying, but did not feel they should be deprived of affection and sexual satisfaction. Still other mothers decided to be celibate and focus their energy on child care. Whatever choice these single mothers made, their testimony reveals how society’s negative views about single motherhood affected women’s decision-making and turned what would have been a private matter between two consenting adults into a public conversation. The continuing tension between social mores and women’s increasing demand for personal choice and opportunity played out in the personal lives of single mothers.

Before the 1970s and the sharp rise in the numbers of divorces and single-parent families, single mothers had few options and more socially regulated opportunities

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<sup>329</sup> Carol Lynn Pearson, *One on the Seesaw: The Ups and Downs of a Single Parent Family* (New York: Random House, 1988), 102.

regarding work, marriage, and motherhood. Widowed mothers were encouraged to remarry. They found new spouses through church, friends, family, or (after 1957) groups like *Parents Without Partners*. Society continued to stigmatize divorced mothers into the 1970s (and arguably beyond). Those divorcees who wished to remarry were regarded suspiciously and encouraged to remarry quickly. Doctors and social workers often discouraged unwed mothers often discouraged from keeping their babies, and many women felt forced to give up their children for adoption.<sup>330</sup> With the relaxing of divorce laws, more socially accepting attitudes towards sexuality, and the rise of the feminist movement, single mothers after 1970 had increased opportunities to shape the family life they wanted. They did not necessarily have to remarry. They could cohabit, stay single and just date, or even have casual sex. However, the hundreds of thousands of single parents who benefitted from changing times had to make up the rules as they went along. As one *Glamour* magazine article commented, “[They find] themselves in the unsought, uncomfortable role of pioneers, and they feel the same anxiety, guilt, and fear of any pioneer who goes into uncharted territory accompanied by children. How to handle your sex life vis-à-vis your children is perhaps the least talked about, most anxiety-laden problem of being a single parent.”<sup>331</sup>

As parents, single mothers understood that the consequences of their choices ultimately affected their children; in this way, the already difficult nature of romance and relationships was made more complicated by these women’s status as mothers. Many women struggled with figuring out how to maintain balance between their personal and family lives, in effect trying to carve out space for their own personal life without disrupting

<sup>330</sup> See Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie*

<sup>331</sup> Nancy Eberle, “The Silent Problem of Single Parenthood,” *Glamour* (Nov. 1978), 266.

their families. They looked to experts for advice on whether or not to begin dating and how it might impact their families. One advice-giver wanted mothers to find a way to keep decision-making about dating from being shaped exclusively by their roles as mothers. She posed the following questions: “1. Do you ask your child for permission to date? 2. Do you try to keep your dates a secret from your children? 3. Do you call home often during evenings out? 4. Do you feel you don’t deserve happiness?”<sup>332</sup> Doing any or all of these things may have signaled to the mother that she was not ready to begin dating or that her children were not ready for her to begin dating. The assumptions inherent in this line of questioning reflected the dominant views of motherhood and sexuality of the time. Good mothers put their children’s needs first and worried about their children’s happiness. Good mothers would not be too independent. Good mothers sacrificed their own happiness in order to care for their children. For women in the decades after World War II, the character traits of sacrifice, dependence, and submission signified successful womanhood.<sup>333</sup> Despite the views being ushered in by the feminist movement, challenging women to be independent, make their own choices, and put their happiness first, many mothers continued to judge and be judged by the traditional standards of womanhood of the post-war decades. Hence the guidelines outlined in the advice columnist’s questions which measured a mother’s readiness to date by the reaction of her children.

Social mores complicated issues even further by continuing the view that sexual satisfaction for women needed to be contained within the confines of marriage. Over the

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<sup>332</sup> Mary Mattis. *Sex and the Single Parent: How You Can Have Happy and Healthy Kids – and an Active Social Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986), 8-9.

<sup>333</sup> See Elaine Tyler May, Wini Breines, Linda Gordon

course of the twentieth century, the understanding of women's sexuality and the acceptance of the need for women to be sexually satisfied increased.<sup>334</sup> However, in order to continue to control women's sexual activity, these new views on women's sexuality were set squarely in the domain of marriage. By the 1950s, women could expect an active sex life as part of their marriage. By incorporating sexual gratification into the normative marriage, society was able to combat changes in women's liberation that may have threatened the traditional family. Historian Elaine Tyler May explained about the 1950s that, "Fears of sexual chaos tend to surface during times of crisis and rapid social change... Much of the anxiety focused on women, whose economic and sexual behavior seemed to have changed dramatically [during the Depression and World War II]."<sup>335</sup> As a response to women gaining more economic and sexual independence in the 1930s and 1940s, the backlash of the 1950s required the containment of sex within marriage. Fears of sexual chaos also surfaced during the 1970s, another time of crisis and rapid social change. Women gained economic and sexual independence during the 1970s and 1980s, leading to real changes for families as well as triggering another backlash. Journalist Susan Faludi described the correlation between income and marriage: "The more women are paid, the less eager they are to marry. A 1982 study of three thousand singles found that women earning high incomes are almost twice as likely to *want* to remain unwed as women earning low incomes."<sup>336</sup> As women gained more equality and economic independence in the 1970s, they threatened the institution of marriage itself. "What is going to happen to marriage and childbearing in a society where women really

<sup>334</sup> The Kinsey Report popularized this notion in 1953 with the publication of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*.

<sup>335</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988, 1999, 2008), 90.

<sup>336</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 16.

have equality?” Princeton demographer Charles Westoff wondered in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1986. “The more economically independent women are, the less attractive marriage becomes.”<sup>337</sup> One way to keep marriage as an attractive option for women was to continue to contain motherhood, childbearing, and respectable sex within the confines of matrimony. However, this backlash disadvantaged single mothers, making it seem almost impossible to be successful mothers and have respectable sex lives.

Dating as a mother was different from dating as a single woman and required single mothers to see intimate relationships through a new lens. In making the decision to become romantically involved with another adult, a single mother necessarily had to take into account the existence of her children. Even if she did not plan on making the children part of the relationship, the fact that she had children complicated her dating life. Arranging childcare, fielding children’s questions, deciding when to introduce a partner to the children, and letting a potential mate know that she was a mother all factored into a single mother’s new dating regime. Divorced single mother Doreen described the frustrations of the situation: “I’m not free. I can’t go off with someone, not even for a night. You’ve got to make complicated arrangements even if you want to spend a night with someone.”<sup>338</sup> Coordinating child care, rearranging schedules, and explaining it to the kids affected the family dynamic and mothers worried about how it would affect their children. Like all parents, single mothers shaped their children by their own behavior and attitudes and, for some, the responsibility to teach their children to be respectful with regards to sex and dating was daunting. They already felt unsure about their decisions

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<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Catherine Itzin, *Splitting Up: Single-Parent Liberation* (London: Virago, 1980), 131.

for themselves, let alone the impact it would have on their children.<sup>339</sup> Advice manuals cautioned women that there were few men willing to date single mothers and that it would be difficult to find a man who would be a good influence around her children. In fact, men who dated single mothers were often portrayed as unsavory characters only looking for sex. One advice manual described such a man, Alan, whose views on dating single mothers would surely have deflated the hopes of women searching for real relationships: “One of the reasons that I like to date single mothers, if I have the choice, is that they know the score, and they realize that the male-female ratio is against them. That’s why there has been no complaint about my attitude toward keeping their children out of the relationship. We really never have to go to her apartment since mine is totally free for sex.”<sup>340</sup> Susan Faludi debunked the myth that there was an unfavorable ratio of men to women during this era in her feminist tome *Backlash*; however, these ideas prevailed during the ‘70s and ‘80s, shaping the way single mothers negotiated relationships.

Many newly single mothers also had anxieties about entering or re-entering the dating scene. Psychologist Dr. Mary Mattis highlighted what worried these mothers: “You may wonder if you can ‘play the game.’ You may not be at all sure what ‘the game’ is. Rumors are frightening you, and you don’t know who or what to believe. Is it true that all the good ones are married? Doesn’t anyone want a committed relationship anymore? Are you really too fat? How old is too old?... Should you have sex on the first date? Will you be adequate sexually?”<sup>341</sup> Questions like these made some single mothers hesitant

<sup>339</sup> Susan Muenchow, “Sex and the Single Parent,” *Parents* June 1979

<sup>340</sup> Dawn B. Sova, *Sex and the Single Mother: Romance and Relationships in the Eighties* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1987), 187.

<sup>341</sup> Mary Mattis, *Sex and the Single Parent: How You Can Have Happy and Healthy Kids – and an Active Social Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986), 12.

even though the sexual revolution of the '60s and '70s had changed the dating game by eliminating many of the restrictive courtship rules of the post-war years, expanding the opportunities for single mothers to have intimate relationships. The sexual revolution also increased the challenges of intimacy and sexuality by creating limitless possibilities. John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman chronicle the loosening of sexual mores of these decades in *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, describing how media magnates like Hugh Hefner and Helen Gurley Brown advocated sex outside the confines of marriage.<sup>342</sup> Brown in particular spoke to women, urging them to “reconsider the idea that sex without marriage is dirty.”<sup>343</sup> She encouraged them to believe that even nice girls could say yes to sex. But those girls who embraced the new standards of sexual freedom still had concerns about how to stay safe, how to meet the right man, and how to be happy; the pages of Brown's *Cosmopolitan* magazine would address these worries for the next five decades (and continues to do so). Like other single women on the dating scene, single mothers worried that they would not be able to find suitable partners and had insecurities. They, too, felt conflicted about the relaxing social attitudes towards sex and dating.<sup>344</sup>

Single mothers not only had to tread the turbulent waters created by the burgeoning sexual revolution, but they had to navigate these tides during the height of

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<sup>342</sup> The authors bring up the important point that a sexual revolution must include loosening restrictions for both men and women; with whom will the men have sex if the women are not allowed to participate? While Hefner's *Playboy* magazine and singleton lifestyle encouraged men to abandon marriage and focus on bachelorhood, Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* published in 1963 gave Hefner's bachelors sexually confident, single girls with whom they could pursue their fantasies.

<sup>343</sup> Helen Gurley Brown, *Sex and the Single Girl* (New York, 1962), 257 in John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York, Harper and Row, 1988), 304.

<sup>344</sup> Melissa Ludtke, *On Our Own: Unmarried Motherhood in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

the feminist debate about motherhood. As discussed in chapter 3, some radical feminist rhetoric about motherhood alienated women with children because it pointed to the biological function of motherhood as one of the culprits in the oppression of women.<sup>345</sup> If having children meant that women were automatically oppressed, then those women who were mothers seemed to be the instruments of their own oppression. It is easy to understand why those mothers who loved their children and enjoyed motherhood would be offended by this type of feminist theorizing. Even the more moderate messages from the women's liberation movement failed to provide much in the way of positive positioning of motherhood. Talk centered around freedom from drudgery, liberation from the home, and a focus on independence and the choice to *not* be a mother.<sup>346</sup> One child-care expert in the late seventies, Elaine Heffner, director of the Nursery School Treatment Center at New York Hospital's Payne Whitney Clinic and an advocate for mothers and children, concluded, "I don't think many in the feminist movement realize how they are echoing the people they say they are opposed to, echoing the contemptuous attitude toward women who are mothers."<sup>347</sup> At the same time, the prevailing post-war attitude about selfless mothering continued to be the dominant ideology about good mothers. In *The Mommy Myth*, author Susan Douglas argued that social mores of the '60s and '70s upheld "the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual

<sup>345</sup> The epitome of this kind of radical theory against biological motherhood was Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* published in 1970.

<sup>346</sup> Robin Morgan, ed. *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).

<sup>347</sup> Janice Mall, "Mothers' Abdication of the Child-Rearing Role," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 3, 1978. ProQuest Historical Newspapers Los Angeles Times (1881-1987), J13.



being, 24/7, to her children.<sup>348</sup> In other words, being a real woman meant being a mother and being a good mother meant absolute devotion to the children. In the crossfires of these contradictory dictates, single mothers faced practically impossible odds. They could not achieve liberation by being childless (nor would most of them *want* to) and they faced almost insurmountable obstacles in devoting themselves physically and emotionally to their children full-time (again, most single mothers would also not *want* to). Of course, these gendered social roles applied only to mothers. As we saw in chapter 5, single fathers did not suffer from this schizophrenic definition of fatherhood and manhood. Socially, single fathers received sympathy and help. In most cases, single fathers continued to be the breadwinner and were not expected to devote themselves full-time to child-rearing. Those fathers who did embrace a more hands-on approach to parenting and domesticity were lauded as heroes. One professional who worked with children admitted that those in her field tended to “blame and intimidate mothers and treat fathers with more respect.”<sup>349</sup> The gender double-standard continued to make single motherhood more difficult than single fatherhood in many ways.

Some mothers made the decision to focus on their children exclusively after their marriages failed, instead of trying to find a new romantic relationship, due to possible retribution by their ex-husbands or penalties by welfare agencies. Real fears about losing custody or vengeance from ex-husbands existed for mothers that caused them to feel the need to prove that they were the best possible mother, meaning they devoted themselves completely to their children. Some divorced mothers were afraid that their ex-husbands

<sup>348</sup> Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it has Undermined Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 4.

<sup>349</sup> Janice Mall, “Mothers’ Abdication of the Child-Rearing Role,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 3, 1978. ProQuest Historical Newspapers Los Angeles Times (1881-1987), J13.

would win custody or somehow sabotage them, if there was any cause to see the mothers as unfit. “The concern is real,” one article explained. “Custody determinations can be revised even after divorce.” As one woman testified, “I have good alimony and child support, and for me to risk it all on a relationship that might not work out would be foolish.”<sup>350</sup> Being sexually promiscuous or being seen as focusing too intently on a new boyfriend could fuel any fires between ex-spouses.

While no-fault divorce legislation made divorce easier, women complained early on of the sexism inherent in the ways lawyers and judges applied the new laws. Riane Eisler, a female attorney and professor at UCLA, characterized the new law passed in California in 1970 as “a disaster and that the inequities start with the client (usually female)/lawyer (usually male) relationship.”<sup>351</sup> Male lawyers, she concluded, identified with the fathers, not the mothers, in the divorce and often provided a disservice to women, even their own clients. Angry ex-husbands could see a new boyfriend as a threat to their position as father of the children or simply just be jealous in cases where the wife instigated the divorce and use a new romance in the woman’s life as evidence of bad mothering; male lawyers and judges proved to be allies in this power play. Because they assumed that most divorcees would quickly remarry, judges and lawyers began a trend toward limiting alimony despite a woman’s own income. As one lawyer told his client, “Besides, you’ll be married again within two years. (And the courts will deduce the same).”<sup>352</sup> Even if a judge was hesitant to revoke a mother’s custody of her children due to her involvement with a new beau, he would have no qualms about lower alimony or

<sup>350</sup> Susan Muenchow, “Sex and the Single Parent,” *Parents* (June 1979), 59.

<sup>351</sup> Carol Powers, “No Fault Divorce,” *Momma:the newspaper/magazine for single mothers* vol 1, no. 4 (March 1973), 3.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*

child-support payments if he believed that the woman was receiving financial support from him.

These same assumptions played out in the welfare system as well, where non-married couples were scrutinized and penalized if found to be cohabiting; social workers surprised mothers with night visits, checking closets and bathrooms for evidence of a male. In England, too, women could not claim benefits if they were living with a boyfriend as “man and wife”, despite being unmarried, because the system assumed that “just because a man and woman are living together, the man is willing and able to support his girlfriend not to mention any children she might have. In many cases the man is neither willing nor able.”<sup>353</sup> Single mothers who wanted to avoid the hassles of spying welfare agents or the retribution of angry ex-spouses found life altogether easier, if not emotionally or sexually gratifying, by remaining out of the dating scene.

In situations where mothers decided not to date, they sometimes turned to their children as substitutes for affection that was missing. This situation could create a number of complications for both the mothers and children: resentment, tension, or feelings of being smothered on the part of the children and isolation and depression for mothers. Single mother Laura “missed the companionship, the cuddling, [and] the sex. It was tempting to substitute the children in some ways – to have Marilyn share that big, empty bed with her and to get deeply involved with Ricky’s out-of-school activities.”<sup>354</sup> If we ignore the obvious Freudian analysis of this statement, we can see that Laura and mothers like her replaced the time and energy they would have expended on male

<sup>353</sup> Catherine Itzin, *Splitting Up: Single-Parent Liberation* (London: Virago, 1980), 92.

<sup>354</sup> Mary Mattis, *Sex and the Single Parent: How You Can Have Happy and Healthy Kids – and an Active Social Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986), 65-66.

partnership with the loving affection and attention of their children. Their children's cuddles, love, and activities distracted them from the adult physical and emotional relationships that they were foregoing. It is understandable why this mother, and others like her, would revert to the safety of being a devoted mother as societal messages constantly reified the nobility of the caring mother.

Susan Griffin, in a 1977 *Ms.* magazine article, explained that “the definition of motherhood in our culture is one in which the mother sacrifices herself to the child. She sacrifices her self. Her *self* is lost. The child becomes the center of her life; the child's needs placed before her needs, until often she lives in her child, through her child.”<sup>355</sup> As long as the mother in question did not stunt her children's growth or become overly powerful or possessive, then the sacrifice of her *self* was seen as a positive price to pay for raising children. However, overly-close or dependent relationships signified malady between parent and child. One mother went to an extreme after an unhealthy relationship fell apart between her eldest son and herself. She relied heavily on him for help with her other children as well as emotional support for herself and admitted that, “when he was sixteen and I was divorced and sometimes very depressed, he was my leaning post.”<sup>356</sup> When her son started dating a twenty-one-year-old girl, they argued and he ran away from home. “I was crushed,” she said. “I unintentionally took several pills when I was depressed over not finding him. I was hospitalized, and he came home.”<sup>357</sup> This mother battled depression, like many single mothers after the death of a spouse or divorce, and made choices resulting in conflict.

<sup>355</sup> Susan Griffin, “On Wanting to Be the Mother I Wanted,” *Ms.*, 5, (1977), 99.

<sup>356</sup> Louis Genevie and Eva Margolies, *The Motherhood Report: How Women Feel about Being Mothers* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 374.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*

It was not uncommon for loneliness and depression to cause single mothers to bond too tightly with their children. The poet alta described it thus: “i sat in my house, & loved my daughter, & cared for her, & we sat in our house away from the world & had only each other & were very lonely. i will never live like that again.”<sup>358</sup> Even if the love and affection of a child could help alleviate the wounds of a missing spouse or lover, it could never replace the adult needs of mothers as women. alta acknowledged that when she stated “i will never live like that again”; despite her love for her child, alta would not wish to return to the loneliness and isolation of that time. Additionally, consequences of overly-close mother-child relationships could carry over into new relationships. One mother recounted how her son was unwilling to accept a new stepfather after a long period of extreme closeness with his mother. She said, “My nine-year-old son and I spent a lot of time together, as his father chose to leave us. We had a very loving and close relationship until I remarried two and a half years ago.”<sup>359</sup> Her son resented the attention his new stepfather took away from him and felt neglected when his mother had two more children. Because of their extreme closeness and the unnatural bond that developed between them, this mother and child had difficulty transitioning into a new family situation.

When she wrote about mothers sacrificing themselves to their children, Sue Griffin was not just talking about single mothers. There had been, and continues to be, the belief that children need their mothers’ undivided attention, love, and guidance in order to prosper. Even today people argue over whether mothers should work or stay home, whether divorced parenting negatively affects children, and if institutional child care

<sup>358</sup> alta, *Momma: A Start On All the Untold Stories* (New York: Times Change Press, 1974), 45.

<sup>359</sup> Louis Genevie and Eva Margolies, *The Motherhood Report: How Women Feel about Being Mothers* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 368.

damages kids. Griffin points out, however, another aspect of this mother- sacrifice that is often overlooked. She came to “one conclusion, that the mother is required to make one other sacrifice. She must sacrifice her sexuality.”<sup>360</sup>

Mothers needed to be wholesome, and middle-class white mothers especially needed to provide a role model for self-control. As discussed earlier, part of the backlash against divorce and loosening sexual mores of the sixties and seventies included a re-containment of sex within the confines of marriage; therefore, single mothers, in particular, needed to sacrifice their sexuality in order to fulfill the dictates of good mothering. Griffin continued her argument: “This denial of her self is perhaps one of the most severe, most damaging, not only because of the physical pleasure found through sexuality, but because it is, in this society, the mode through which we reach other beings outside language, the only way we love with our physical selves, and it is from our sexuality and through it that we find one of our deepest senses of the self.”<sup>361</sup> Denying herself sex would lead to the ultimate isolation in human society. Ironically, it was the act of sex itself that procured a child in the woman’s womb and allowed her to become a mother; so, denying herself sex seemed schizophrenic at the very least. What kind of woman would it take to be self-aware enough to fight the overwhelming forces leading to overdependence on children and isolation from men? One single mother, who described herself as being from the “so-called professional class,” made this statement in response: “I will try to find enough satisfaction in my adult friendships and in my work to avoid the

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<sup>360</sup> Susan Griffin. “On Wanting to Be the Mother I Wanted,” *Ms.*, 5, (1977), 100.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*

temptation to suck Jacob into my private emotional (and woman's) world, craving from a little boy an intimacy and companionship that is not appropriate."<sup>362</sup>

Single parenthood required a plethora of sacrifices from women that exacted a toll and often ended up targeting single mothers' sexuality. Over and over, single mothers revealed that the lack of personal time and fatigue worked together to kill any chances of finding new romance. One single mother, Beverly, noted in her journal, "Talking about sex with a friend (also a mother) during a hurried whispered conversation in a few stolen moments, over coffee while the kids are sleeping; she says she hasn't felt like it for two-and-a-half years; I say it's been like that for me since I got pregnant..."<sup>363</sup> Neither friend had the desire to have sex and Beverly cleverly captured the gist of the problem for many mothers of small children with the very description of her conversation: the women had to whisper hurriedly to one another, catching a quick coffee break during a few "stolen moments" while the children slept. They both lacked time and energy which assuredly contributed to their diminished libido. While it is not uncommon for some women's sexual activity to decrease around pregnancy and childbirth, Beverly's friend admitted to being uninterested in sex for over two years. This could have been a personal problem limited to her friend's body chemistry; however, it could also have been environmental, caused by the continuous stress of single parenting. Beverly continued her journal entry by adding, "...and besides, there's no one to do it with, and I'm too tired to look; I jot down a few words and make a mental note to write something about it, later, I look at the

<sup>362</sup> Martha Drewson, "To Be An Unmarried Mother: The Most Important Decision I Ever Made," *Redbook: The Magazine for Young Adults*, 142 (Feb. 1974), 34.

<sup>363</sup> Beverly Slapin, *The Magic Washing Machine: A Diary of Single Motherhood* (Mesquite, Texas: Ide House, Inc., 1983), 43.

scribble: “*lost sexuality, body just for Carlos* [her son].”<sup>364</sup> For many single mothers, there was not enough time in the day to do all of the work, housekeeping, child-rearing, and general living *without* a partner. Finding the time to fit in a new partner seemed overwhelming. Beverly described the situation as a sacrifice for her son. She lost her sexuality in order to mother her child. As Sue Griffin had expressed, good mothers were required to make ultimate sacrifices for their children and Beverly seemed to have done just that.

One 1979 *Parents* magazine article discussed the struggle for single parents to find the time to meet new partners: “Most single parents seem concerned, not about sex per se, but about how to find the time to nurture any kind of new, intimate relationship without neglecting their children. ‘Sometimes I feel like I’m in a maze, says Kate, who, in her mid-30s, is trying to raise two children, attend night classes, work part-time, and pursue a new and promising relationship...’”<sup>365</sup> Kate’s schedule was full even for a single person, with work and school. For a single mother of two children, it was equivalent to working two full time jobs. Trying to add dating and romance to this jam-packed schedule proved to be problematic for Kate and her beau. “She finds herself regularly staying up until 2 a.m., not so much to make love as just to talk with the new man in her life. This couple has actually only spent four complete nights together, when both his and her children happened to be visiting their other parents.”<sup>366</sup> Like Kate, many of the mothers felt frustrated by the lack of time, lack of privacy, and exhaustion they continually felt as single parents. Studies have “describe[d] the stress and psychological impacts

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<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

<sup>365</sup> Susan Muenchow, “Sex and the Single Parent,” *Parents* (June 1979), 58.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid.



associated with single parenthood and the 'time poverty' of mothers alone, rearing young children.<sup>367</sup> It zapped their sexual energy and made it difficult for them to build new relationships when they did find partners.

One of the challenges single mothers faced when re-entering the dating scene and forming new sexual relationships was the effect it would have on their children. Over the course of the two decades, psychologists and advice columnists tackled the problem with gusto. Many self-help books' generally concluded that children could react in any number of ways to a mother's lover. They could become angry, sad, mad, over-attached, or indifferent. Doctors and therapists gave advice across the spectrum and the result, as one journalist noted, was the discovery that "the experts don't know [what to do] either."<sup>368</sup> One issue that recurred in a number of studies was the question of how a mother's sex life could influence her teenage daughter. In some cases, there seemed to be a transfer of equal status between a teenaged daughter and a mother who had an active sex life. One mother questioned her decisions, saying, "I'm still not certain it's right to pass it on to my 16-year-old daughter. When she wants to bring a boy home for spring vacation, what can I do? Especially when my lover is clearly spending nights with me?"<sup>369</sup> Somehow this mother lost her parental authority by having sex. Another mother, Heide, made the decision to treat her 15-year-old daughter as an equal, because "Glenda, who was physically mature for fifteen, seemed like a roommate. Heide enjoyed this new equality, and so did her child. But when Heide found herself wanting to bring a man

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<sup>367</sup> Sheila B. Kamerman and Alfred J. Kahn, *Mothers Alone: Strategies for a Time of Change* (Dover, MA: Auburn House Publishing, 1988), 189.

<sup>368</sup> Jane Adams, "Sex and the Single Parent," *Harper's Bazaar* (July 1978), 115.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*

home, she became confused. She reached the conclusion that it would be all right for her to bring male guests home only if she permitted her daughter the same freedom.”<sup>370</sup>

The mothers may have made decisions about their daughters' sexuality in order to justify their own desires and choices. Putting aside the issue of whether or not it was in the best interest of these teenage girls, the boundary between mother and daughter was blurred because of the mothers' conflicted feelings toward their own sex lives.

Even though the broadening of sexual rules in the 1970s contributed in creating challenges for some single mothers, the decade's changes in opportunity and choice helped others create a new kind of life. In their efforts to provide the best possible experience for their children, some mothers made the decision to postpone, for a short time or even indefinitely, the idea of remarrying. They chose to remain partnerless. Some mothers had had terrible previous relationships and decided to take a break from men. These women exuded an air of relief at finally being left alone. Other mothers started off their role of single mother without a husband or partner and made the conscious decision to remain single. While the majority of single mothers after 1970 were single due to divorce, a small minority of them were single by choice, or “bachelor mothers – young women who have entered motherhood through the back door by raising their babies out of wedlock.”<sup>371</sup> These mothers often were influenced by the burgeoning women's liberation movement and had an unconventional view of marriage and motherhood. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, “The biggest rate of increase in bachelor motherhood was found among white middle-class girls,” a segment of the population that

<sup>370</sup> Mary Mattis, *Sex and the Single Parent: How You Can Have Happy and Healthy Kids – and an Active Social Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986), 18.

<sup>371</sup> Arlene Van Breems, “Bachelor Motherhood: Weighing the Options,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 17, 1969.

had traditionally been forced to give up their illegitimate babies for adoption.<sup>372</sup> Bachelor mother Jane Harriman explained that she and the other women in her consciousness-raising group were dedicated to changing society by their actions. She wrote, “None of us hates men, none of us wants to live a life without men... I hope that someday I will meet a man who is sure enough of his own identity and his own sex to love me as an equal human being.”<sup>373</sup>

The bachelor mothers did not have to be outwardly feminists, however, in order to embrace the new idea that parenthood and marriage did not necessarily have to be simultaneous. One study of three Catholic single mothers - Claire, Alice and Helen - found that all of them rejected the idea of marrying the first man who came along after the birth of their child. While they admitted that being married would make life easier financially, they were hesitant to make the commitment for the sake of stability and wealth. “I think marriage is fine,” Claire said. “But that’s not going to solve all my problems. You can’t sit around and wait to get married.”<sup>374</sup> Because of the choices available to women by the 1970s, Claire could confidently say that marriage was not her only option. In fact, she seemed to think that marriage was an unlikely prospect and realistically decided to support her child herself. The bachelor mothers of the late 1960s and early 1970s foreshadowed the rise of the “single mother by choice” of the 1980s. Single mothers by choice were most often middle-class white women in their thirties who began to face their “biological time clock”, a phrase that described the nearing end of their ability to reproduce. “Economically – and often psychologically – independent in a way their

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

<sup>373</sup> Jane Harriman, “In Trouble: The Story of An Unmarried Woman’s Decision to Keep Her Child,” *The Atlantic*, 225 (1970), 98.

<sup>374</sup> Liz O’Connor, “Having My Baby,” *U.S. Catholic*, 43 (August 1978), 40.

mothers never were, a growing number are unwilling to relinquish the idea of having and rearing children, even if it means doing so outside of marriage.<sup>375</sup> The phenomenon of single motherhood by choice seemed to be caused by more women pursuing higher degrees of education, spending a longer span of time in the workforce establishing careers, and the postponement of marriage to a later date. By 1984, roughly 45,000 white women in their thirties (roughly 8 percent) had their children out of wedlock.<sup>376</sup> Indeed, by the beginning of the following decade the country would find itself in a cultural debate over “single mothers by choice” when television sitcom character Murphy Brown decided to forego having an abortion in order to bear and raise her illegitimate child alone. Then Vice President Dan Quayle's commented: "It doesn't help matters when prime time TV has Murphy Brown, a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid, professional woman, mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another lifestyle choice."<sup>377</sup> Quayle's remarks revealed both the nervousness about waning male authority as well as confirmed the success of the women's liberation movement in creating viable alternative choices for women.

Because of greater economic and social opportunities available to women by the end of the 1970s as well as the social changes fought for by women's liberation activists, bachelor mothers were able to conceive of their situations as a personal choice. One bachelor mother pointed out that this concept of choice was key: “Look, if *you* choose, even if it's a lifetime of mistakes, at least they're yours. And your joys are honest. It's marvelous. Jill [her daughter] is an extension of my left hip and I'm more me than I ever

<sup>375</sup> Sheila B. Kamerman and Alfred J. Kahn, *Mothers Alone: Strategies for a Time of Change* (Dover, MA: Auburn House Publishing, 1988), 127.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

<sup>377</sup> “Murphy Brown, National Menace,” *Off Our Backs* vol. 22, no. 7 (July 1992), 5.

was.”<sup>378</sup> Over the course of these two pivotal decades single motherhood, influenced largely by women’s liberation, became a personal choice available to women through greater job opportunity, education, and increasing social acceptance. In 1962, Helen Gurley Brown published *Sex and the Single Girl*, laying the groundwork for single women to become financially and sexually independent. She argued “that singleness is a perfectly wonderful state for a woman, for any length of time, rather than simply a prelude to marriage.”<sup>379</sup> Gurley Brown advocated that women needed make their own choices and she encouraged them to manipulate the patriarchal rules of society if needed. Bachelor mothers logically included motherhood into Gurley Brown’s equation, but faced a particular set of problems ranging from housing discrimination to job security. As early as 1966, the National Welfare Rights Association “advanced a feminist view of the work of raising children and analyzed the problem of single motherhood as derived from the low wages that made it impossible for them to simultaneously earn for and care for their children.”<sup>380</sup> With economic support, single mothers could choose to remain unmarried and become successful mothers. Many in the early 1970s, though, faced an uphill battle: “Blackballed by credit agencies, rated high risk by insurance companies, refused occupancy by nervous landlords.”<sup>381</sup> Even harder to combat was the stigma against unmarried mothers; despite the efforts of activists, reformers, and single mothers themselves to create social acceptance, change happened slowly. Journalist Gail Sheehy reported, “The fact is, our society isn’t quite ready, but some of our post-hippies,

<sup>378</sup> Gail Sheehy, “Missing Elements in New York Families: Part I: Bachelor Mothers,” *New York* (Jan. 1969), 22.

<sup>379</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere: The Life of Helen Gurley Brown* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 99.

<sup>380</sup> Linda Gordon, “The Women’s Liberation Movement” in Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon and Astrid Henry, *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women’s Movements* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2014), 72.

<sup>381</sup> Lanie Jones, “New Pride in Being a Single Mother,” *Los Angeles Times* (March 23, 1972), 17.

socialites, and lonely urbanites are doing it anyway.”<sup>382</sup> Motherhood and marriage were also central to the struggle for women’s liberation under the slogan of “the personal is political”. As historian Christine Stansell explained, “The insight was that women’s oppression came from the family, marriage, and the bedroom, as well as the job market and courtroom.”<sup>383</sup> Women’s inability to have autonomy in all of these areas caused female oppression. The most obvious example of the importance of women to choose their own fates was the slogan for the advocates of abortion; if you supported legalizing abortion, then you were Pro-Choice.

Choice did not always lead to the loosening of sexual mores, experimentation, or life on the margins of society. One of the outcomes of the decision to postpone marriage temporarily or permanently was celibacy as a lifestyle choice. While some single mothers feared that unwanted sexual abstinence would plague them, a small cohort embraced celibacy. Again, originating in the feminist movement or from a religious background, celibate single mothers saw the absence of a sex-life as an advantage. Those who were motivated by women’s liberation expressed the idea that they were rejecting main stream society’s obsession with sex, and also the counter-culture’s message of free love which they felt still objectified women. A commune member, Jean of Mountain Grove explained, “For me, I prize the option of celibacy. The saying *no* to the social pressures which define and direct me as a sexual being feels like saying *yes* to a more inclusive view of my person, to the inner urges which draw me to politics, writing, relationships, dance, and other creative expressions.”<sup>384</sup> Women who practiced celibacy wanted to refocus their

<sup>382</sup> Gail Sheehy, “Missing Elements in New York Families: Part I Bachelor Mothers,” *New York*, January 13, 1969, 23.

<sup>383</sup> Christine Stansell, *The Feminist Promise: 1792 to the Present* (New York: The Modern Library, 2011), 232.

<sup>384</sup> Jean of Mountain Grove, “Celibacy,” *Momma: The Sourcebook for Single Mothers* (New York: The New American Library, 1976), 134.

sexual energy into other areas of their lives, including artistic outlets, education, careers, and child-rearing.

As we saw earlier, a common complaint among single mothers was the fatigue of parenting solo and its subsequent drain on their sex drives. Jean of Mountain Grove and others like her decided to channel what energy they would have expended on sex on other activities in order to create more fulfilling lives. They tended to see satisfaction outside of themselves. Jean mused, “Maybe other women really are lusty all the time and can nurture their creative selves into actuality while giving generously of their sexual energy to lovers or casual partners. I can’t and I’m not going to feel bad about myself and I don’t want my partner to feel bad either. I guess I am suspecting that the beauty of true sexual sharing is held before all women as a lure to distract us from the more dangerous, and the ultimate goal of the beautiful life of our fulfilled creative unique persons.”<sup>385</sup> Celibacy could lead to a more meaningful life for some single mothers.

Women found inspiration from religious beliefs to remain celibate in their single motherhood. One widow, Sandra, whose husband died of brain cancer, took the biblical verse from Isaiah 54:5 to be her guide: “For your Maker is your husband – the Lord Almighty is his name.”<sup>386</sup> Sandra likened herself to a nun who was married to God. She remained celibate and dedicate herself to God and her children. Religious, celibate women devoted their energies to their children, family, friends, and church. In Sandra’s self-help book for single mothers, she confessed, “In case you’re wondering, I’ve remained celibate all these years. My life is too full now to add one more item to my

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>386</sup> Sandra Aldrich, *From One Single Mother to Another* (Ventura, CA: From Gospel Light Pub Regal Books, 1991), 20.

juggling act.”<sup>387</sup> She encouraged other mothers to try celibacy because, “Rechanneling sexual energy into our work, sports or other wholesome activities results in creative productivity.”<sup>388</sup> Though quite possibly only a small number of women chose celibacy as a lifestyle choice; there is little empirical evidence to quantify their numbers. However, the existence of celibate motherhood sheds light on the extraordinarily difficult task of the single mother. Women often did not have enough time in the day to perform all of the tasks required to support themselves and their children as well as find time for personal hobbies, interests, and activities on top of making room in their lives for a sexual relationship with a partner. Like the feminist Jean from Green Mountain, Sandra believed that refocusing sexual energy would help a single mother have a more fulfilling, creative, expressive life. Sandra believed in a greater plan set for her by God, and she testified, “I genuinely believe my life would never have turned out the way it did if I had settled for what my extended family and even society expected, instead of what God wanted to give me. And I believe God wanted to give me more of Himself, not another husband.”<sup>389</sup> The key to successful single motherhood during the ‘70s and ‘80s was increased opportunity and *choice*, as the existence of these celibate mothers proves.

Few single mothers advised, or even really discussed, the consequences of an overabundance of sexual activity. For the most part, mothers who documented their adventures or confessions of single motherhood focused on the difficulties in finding suitable partners, the frustrations of balancing dating lives with parenthood, and the strategies they used when introducing potential mates to their children. One single

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid., 41.



mother, Nancy, gave a brutally honest and detailed account of her years as a single mother, which began in the late 1960s and lasted decades. She had six children living at home with her and chronicled a life on the margins of society, trying to support her family on women's wages during years when women made less than half of what men earned. Nancy met Duke who was "sweet talking" and knew how to make [her] feel like the most beautiful, sexy, perfect woman he'd ever met."<sup>390</sup> Nancy recalled:

No man had ever said those things to me. Karl had spent nineteen years berating and beating me into submission. I had responded by being constantly drunk. But those days were behind me forever, and now I was blissfully in love. We didn't have money for a motel every night, so we fucked every place we could park: in lots, at the beach, in the park – always in the back seat of my car.<sup>391</sup>

The years Nancy spent in an abusive marriage had taken their toll on her. She became obsessed with the feelings of ecstasy that she found with her new beau, despite his obvious problems. Their combined poverty, their lack of privacy, her own children, none of it deterred them from finding pleasure in their physical relationship. Nancy had only known Duke for a few weeks and met him at an AA meeting. She was instantly attracted to him and felt a burning desire to have sexual intercourse. She mentioned in her autobiography that, "In the three years I had been divorced from Karl, I had not the inclination or the time to think about love or sex. I masturbated a lot without thinking I needed a man."<sup>392</sup> Nancy's sex life went from celibacy to obsession with Duke. Eventually she brought him home to meet the children, and they moved their lovemaking into her bed. Nancy admitted to feeling guilty about this move, but she described her desire as overwhelming her judgment.

<sup>390</sup> Nancy Lee Hall, *A True Story of a Single Mother* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984), 31.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

During her relationship with Duke, Nancy's life spiraled out of control. Her story does not advocate a lifestyle of uninhibited sex, but it does provide a glimpse into the ways that emotions, physical desires, and circumstance can shape a single mother's decisions. Another mother, Carolyn See, experienced a situation not unlike Nancy's. Her husband had left her for a younger woman, but she realized that it was a blessing in disguise as her ex-husband had been a nightmare and she had been "in a rage for years, a rage so intense but so much a part of me that I hadn't even noticed it."<sup>393</sup> One would think that Carolyn's unhealthy marriage would have provided her with some kind of emotional armor or a sixth sense to ward her away from unstable, unsuitable men. However, like Nancy above, Carolyn found herself in an unhealthy relationship with a narcissistic and egotistical man whose greatest draw was the physical reaction he elicited within her. Carolyn spent a wild summer with the man, she called him Juan in her retelling, whom, she said, drove her out of her mind. Even her ex-husband tried to warn her off the character; he said, "I don't know why you are doing it, Carolyn. Juan seems just like I am, only in spades."<sup>394</sup> She admitted that was true, but when she was near him, she had a physical reaction which clouded her judgment. She remembered, "My identity, my 'accomplishments,' my friends, my children, all went down the drain when I looked at him (or, God help me, when he touched me)."<sup>395</sup> This was a woman who described herself as being thirty-eight years old with an IQ of 165 who had a PhD and was a published novelist. Despite knowing consciously that Juan was taking advantage of her and treating her badly, she could not resist the physical and emotional pleasures that

<sup>393</sup> Carolyn See, "On Falling in Love," *Momma: The Sourcebook for Single Mothers* (New York: The New American Library, 1976), 136.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

resulted from their affair. Eventually, though, like Nancy before her, Carolyn finally had enough of being treated poorly and left Juan. She felt relieved that it had only taken her one summer to realize her mistake, instead of the ten years of marriage she had suffered through before. Both of these stories provide a glimpse into the psyches of the women who dared to veer from the path of the status quo at a time of change and tension surrounding women's sexuality and motherhood. To many outsiders, their dalliances with these Don Juans might have marked them as bad mothers, but both Nancy and Carolyn's experiences highlighted the complicated nature of the relationship between motherhood and sexuality, even for the women themselves.

In conclusion, single mothers of the 1970s faced numerous decisions about their sex lives. Those mothers who wanted to date and possibly marry – or remarry – while juggling the responsibilities of single parenthood faced great challenges. They frequently had inadequate amounts of time, childcare, and money to date. They often felt fatigued after working and parenting full-time or found locating eligible men frustrating. Single mothers faced the stigma of being labeled deviants or sexually promiscuous and could face real repercussions from jealous ex-husbands who could challenge custody decisions. Despite the obstacles, however, the majority of single mothers in these decades profited from the gains made by the women's liberation movement. With greater freedom to make choices about their futures, single mothers in these decades widened the possibilities of what constituted good mothering. In an era of "increasing public acceptance of sex and an emphasis on individual moral choices," leading feminist Gloria

Steinem noted more young women “becoming self-motivated and autonomous... they are free to take sex, education, work and even marriage when and how they like.”<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *America and the Pill: A History of Promise, Peril, and Liberation* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 74.

## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

Single mothers helped transform American motherhood at the end of the twentieth century. They challenged gender norms regarding housework and child-rearing. They demanded access to housing, education, and jobs. Single mothers fought to be liberated from oppressive stereotypes about unwed mothers, and embraced new ideals about equality and citizenship. Choice played a pivotal role in the success of single-mother-headed families. Women who were empowered to live the kind of life they chose tended to be happier and more productive. The seventies were a time of radical social transformation in America and other parts of the Western, Anglo world. Single mothers helped shape new family forms and workplace environments that have taken root at the turn of the twenty-first century.

*Transforming Motherhood: Single Parents' Liberation* has examined the challenges faced by single mothers in the 1970s, as well as the triumphs single mothers have enjoyed. No other history about single motherhood of this kind exists. *Transforming Motherhood* is important in that it focuses *on the experiences of single mothers* as a way to understand the changing shape of society. The literature on single motherhood of the twentieth century often fails to take single mothers' point-of-view into account. Single-mother-headed families are viewed as the problem to be solved instead of historical actors working within the flawed economic, political, and social systems of their times. Very frequently, authors use single mothers as a way to discuss the history of politics or labor. By using this technique, historians and sociologists use the lens of single motherhood to discuss a particular historical theme, but they fail to center the history on these single-mother-headed families. For example, Linda Gordon's *Pitied But Not*

*Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* traces the history of welfare in America in the twentieth century using the lens of single mothers. Gordon's main focus is understanding how the welfare in America was shaped by legislators and how those legislators' views of single mothers helped shape the policies. Single mothers who have an active role in the history presented by Gordon were members of political organizations.

Historians Pat Thane and Tanya Evans wrote another account of single mothers in the twentieth century which focused on welfare, political responses to the rise of single motherhood, and the lives of single mothers. *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?: Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth Century England* echoes the findings of *Transforming Motherhood*. Both histories focus on the experiences of single motherhood and give autonomy to single mothers as historical actors. While *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?* covers all of the twentieth century in England, both studies agree that the 1970s and '80s were a time of great political and social change, prompted by increasing numbers of single-parent families. Thane and Evans identify the unique conditions of England in the 1970s, a time when the generous post-war welfare state was under attack, as contributing to the political and social discourse about single mothers. English single mothers had better social services than their American counterparts; however, several members of Parliament, including Sir Morris Finer, advocated for increased benefits to counter the effects of poverty, which they viewed as the main problem affecting single mothers.

Law professor Nancy Dowd also agreed that poverty was the true underlying problem in relation to single-mother-headed families. She published *In Defense of Single-Parent Families* in 1997. The title itself is proof that the major focus on single motherhood is as a problem. Dowd felt moved to write a book defending single parents against the

condemnation inherent in political, moral, and educational conversations about single-parent families. Dowd points out in her introduction that, “The stigma attached to single-parent families diverts attention from poverty while blaming single parents for the poverty of their families. It is a cruel Catch 22.”<sup>397</sup> Most honest studies of single-parent-headed families since the 1970s has pointed out that poverty is the actual culprit causing problems related to single-parent families. Despite the empirical evidence, there continues to be a strong belief, “that two parents of opposite sexes are an essential, irreducible minimum for healthy child development.”<sup>398</sup> Overcoming these two beliefs, ingrained in the individualistic, industrialized world, continues to be the most difficult hurdle in effecting positive, lasting change for single-parent families.

As recently as 2012, political conservatives in Wisconsin acted on their beliefs that poor, single mothers were bad for society. Glenn Grothman, a Wisconsin state senator, introduced Senate Bill 507, based on the belief that single motherhood was a significant contributing factor in child abuse. According to reports, “SB507 would require the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board to emphasize that non-marital parenthood is a contributing factor to child abuse and neglect.”<sup>399</sup> Educational materials promoting an awareness of child abuse and neglect would be required to include non-marital parenthood as a cause of child abuse, according to the proposal. The bill failed to pass later that year, but the message it sent was clear: some Americans continue to believe that single parenting is inherently bad for society. This view of single parents is not just

<sup>397</sup> Nancy Dowd, *In Defense of Single Parent Families* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), xiv.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

<sup>399</sup> “Glenn Grothman, Wisconsin Senator, Proposes Law That Declares Single Parenthood Child Abuse,” *HuffingtonPost*, March 02, 2012. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/02/glenn-grothman-wisconsin-law-single-parenthood-child-abuse\\_n\\_1316834.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/02/glenn-grothman-wisconsin-law-single-parenthood-child-abuse_n_1316834.html)

an American problem, either. A recent study of single mothers in Australian welfare news concluded that representations of single mothers tended to show them, “as irresponsible, a burden, and to a lesser extent, dishonest.”<sup>400</sup>

*Transforming Motherhood* explores the history of single motherhood in the 1970s, an era when the possibility of change and hope for the future was not yet tarnished. Even though single mothers of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s keenly felt the stigma against them, they believed that they could effect enough changes in society’s way of thinking to someday eradicate this misconception. Single parents actively engaged in campaigns to normalize the stigma against them and their children. They lobbied to change laws that prohibited them from receiving fair custody arrangements, child support assistance, job opportunities, child-care, and housing. Even though some sectors of society continue to believe that single parents are the cause of immorality, crime, and the decline of civilization, as Senate Bill 507 exhibits, there is much evidence that the efforts of single parents in the 1970s worked. For example, as of October 2015, reports show that, “a quarter of British children are being raised by a single parent.”<sup>401</sup> Additionally, studies have predicted that, “Most children will be born out of wedlock [in one year] because of the decline in marriage.”<sup>402</sup> American children, too, will spend time in single-mother families. According to the Washington Post, “Single motherhood has grown so common in America that demographers now believe half of all children will live with a single mom

<sup>400</sup> Emily Wolfinger, “Australia’s Welfare Discourse and News: Presenting Single Mothers,” *Global Media Journal Australian Edition* v. 8 no. 2 (2014), 7.

<sup>401</sup> Daniel Martin, “A Quarter of British Children are Being Raised by a Single Parent, New Figures Reveal,” *Daily Mail*, October 10, 2015. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-254097/Britain-fourth-highest-number-single-parents-EU.html>

<sup>402</sup> Steven Swinford, “Most Children Will Be Born Out of Wedlock By 2016,” *The Telegraph*, July 2013. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/10172627/Most-children-will-be-born-out-of-wedlock-by-2016.html>



at some point before the age of 18.”<sup>403</sup> Despite the backlash against single parenthood and fears against the perceived consequences, the number of single parent families continues to rise. If predictions are correct, single parenthood will become the norm within a decade.

*Transforming Motherhood* shows how single motherhood evolved during the last few decades of the twentieth century. Economic, political, and social conditions shaped the opportunities and challenges single mothers experienced. In Chapter 2, the dissertation examined the ways in which single mothers’ groups engaged politically in both the U.S.A. and U.K. and how single mothers’ organizations were pivotal in helping new single parents adjust to life raising children alone. It argued that single parents’ began a liberation movement, challenging the social mores which contributed to oppressive welfare, work, and housing conditions. Chapter 3 discussed the ways in which women became single mothers and how social messages between generations helped make single motherhood a viable alternative for Baby Boom girls. Feminism also played an important role in shaping single motherhood, providing rhetoric of equality, empowerment, and community. In Chapter 4, the issue of work is addressed. Researchers agree that economic stability is the most important factor determining the success of single parent families and the 1970s provided opportunities as well as problems for single mothers supporting their children alone. Feminist fatherhood is examined in Chapter 5. The experiences of single fathers helps us more fully understand the plight of single mothers and sheds light on the ways in which gender affect both men and women as they parent alone. Finally, Chapter 6 describes how single mothers

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<sup>403</sup> Emily Badger, “The Unbelievable Rise of Single Motherhood in America over the Last 50 Years,” *Washington Post* (December 18 2014).

negotiated their personal lives while trying to fulfill their roles as mothers. Single mothers responded to the strains and stresses of dating and sexual relationships in the context of the Sexual Revolution. *Transforming Motherhood* finds that women had the opportunity to choose from a wide range of lifestyle choices, from celibacy to sexual promiscuity. In general, the dissertation finds that CHOICE is one of the key features of single parenthood in the 1970s.

The history of single parents in the seventies and eighties helps us understand the conditions of single parents in the twenty-first century. But their experiences also help explain some of the challenges facing married-parent families where both parents work. Single mothers in the seventies were in the vanguard of working parents. They had to balance work responsibilities, domestic duties, and childcare. Married, working parents today find it increasingly difficult to maintain what we now call a healthy work-life balance. In an era of falling real income and an increase in the cost of living, two incomes are needed to support a family. According to the Center for American Progress, “Breadwinning wives are even more common in families with lower incomes. Seven in 10 (69.7 percent) working wives earn as much or more than their husbands in the bottom 20 percent of income distribution for all families. And about half (45.3 percent) of working wives are breadwinners in families in the middle of the income distribution, up from four in 10 (39.1 percent) in 2007 and only 15.2 percent in 1967.”<sup>404</sup> With both parents working, there is no full-time homemaker in the family, though research shows that mothers

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<sup>404</sup> E.J. Dionne, Jr., “Two Paycheck Couples are Quickly Becoming the Norm,” *Washington Post*, (April 18, 2012). [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/two-paycheck-couples-are-quickly-becoming-the-norm/2012/04/18/gIQAISzIRT\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/two-paycheck-couples-are-quickly-becoming-the-norm/2012/04/18/gIQAISzIRT_story.html)

continue to do more of the childcare and household chores than fathers.<sup>405</sup> Childcare costs continue to rise and are typically the largest cost for families with children. Childcare costs often exceed the price paid for rent or college tuition.<sup>406</sup> Parents also feel stress about missing work due to children's illnesses or family obligations. The United States, in particular, has the world's worst maternity leave and paid family leave, although there is a growing movement to increase paid leave.<sup>407</sup> Single mothers in the 1970s faced the same conditions and argued for reforms over four decades ago.

*Transforming Motherhood* leaves us with some lingering questions about the nature of family and marriage and their intersection with the world of work. How can society or government best help all working families, including single-parent families? In what ways can private industry change to make family life less stressful? What can be done about the gender imbalance in parenting? What are the long-term consequences of negatively stigmatizing children of divorce or single-parent families? These questions do not focus on single mothers as the problem. They acknowledge that a variety of external forces contribute to the challenges faced by single-parent families. By examining the history of single-mother-headed families at the turn of the twenty-first century, *Transforming Motherhood* provides a place to begin to understand the social, economic, and political factors which turned single motherhood into a problem. As we shift the focus

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<sup>405</sup> Bryce Covert, "Why it Matters That Women Do Most of the Housework," *The Nation* (April 30, 2014).

<http://www.thenation.com/article/why-it-matters-women-do-most-housework/>

<sup>406</sup> Susanna Kim, "Childcare Costs Exceed Rent in Most American Cities, Study Finds," *ABC News* (Oct. 8, 2015).

<http://abcnews.go.com/Business/child-care-costs-exceed-rent-american-cities-study/story?id=34350371> and Danielle Abreu, "Child Care Costs Exceed Rent, College Tuition in Many States: Study," *NBC New York* (Oct. 9, 2015). <http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/national-international/Rising-Child-Care-Cost-Study-331806381.html>

<sup>407</sup> Martin Astermuhle, "Washington, D.C., Council Proposal Sets New Standard on Paid Family Leave," *NPR* (Oct. 9, 2015). <http://www.npr.org/2015/10/09/447236626/washington-d-c-council-proposal-sets-new-standard-on-paid-family-leave>

away from single mothers as the cause of the problem, we find a better set of solutions to the problems of poverty and stress many single parents continue to face.

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**ABSTRACT****TRANSFORMING MOTHERHOOD: SINGLE PARENTS' LIBERATION IN THE 1970s**

by

**ELIZABETH RYAN****December 2015****Advisor:** Dr. Elizabeth Faue**Major:** History**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

*Transforming Motherhood* examines the experiences of single mothers from the early 1970s until the mid-1980s. Because most accounts of single motherhood in these decades focused on single motherhood as the cause of social problems, most of the discourse about single motherhood is framed on the premise that single mothers are bad. The result of this assumption is to negate the single mother experience and uphold policies which try to limit single motherhood altogether. *Transforming Motherhood* seeks to redefine the problem of single motherhood by focusing on the issues from the perspective of single mothers. When single motherhood is examined through this lens, one finds that the underlying problems of lack of housing, inadequate child-care, gender inequality in the labor force and income, and inefficient welfare support are the actual causes of social problems associated with single motherhood. Furthermore, *Transforming Motherhood* questions the gendered notions of motherhood by studying single fatherhood in the same era, finding that single fathers who performed primary caregiver functions had much in common with their female counterparts. Single mothers in the 1970s were the pioneers of twenty-first century parenthood, facing the challenges which most parents, married or unmarried, experience today.



## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Elizabeth Ryan is a native of Southeast, Michigan. She attended Marshall University as a member of the Society of Yeager Scholars where she completed her BA in History. In 1998, Ryan defended her senior thesis for her BA degree, entitled “African American Women and the Civil Rights Movement: Re-memory Through Fiction and Memoir.” Ryan began graduate school at Wayne State University in 2001. The early decade of the new millennium was productive for Ryan. She had two daughters, Molly, born in 2004, and Abigail, born in 2007. In addition, Ryan completed a Graduate Certificate in American Studies in 2006, Masters degree in History in 2008, and a Graduate Certificate in World History in 2009. Ryan’s master’s essay was entitled “Southern White Female Migrants: An Examination of Migration to Detroit, 1950-1969.”

Ryan was awarded a King-Chavez-Parks Future Faculty Fellowship in 2009 and also became a Graduate Teaching Assistant in the History Department at Wayne State University. In 2011, the Graduate School awarded her the Garrett T. Heberlein Outstanding Graduate Teaching Award. In 2012, Ryan won first place in the Graduate Exhibition’s Oral Competition as well as a student travel grant from the Social Science History Association to present research at their annual conference. She helped form the History Graduate Student Association at WSU and worked on its board as Treasurer and President.

Elizabeth Ryan is currently a History Teacher and Head House Advisor for the Kingswood residence hall at Cranbrook Kingswood Upper School in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.